

“Glutton for Power”

Matthew 17:1-9

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

February 3, 2008 – Transfiguration Sunday

A strange thing happened as Jesus was doing the things we warmly remember Jesus for doing. He was performing miracles¹, healing people², telling parables³ – all the wonderful things that make Jesus Jesus – when he started saying some fairly disturbing things. He started talking about suffering and sacrifice – not the kind of thing that most people want to hear from Jesus:

***Those who want to save their life will lose it,
And those who want to lose their life for my sake will find it.⁴***

For any of the disciples who had believed that Jesus was going to come down, wow the masses with lavish feasts and fantastic displays of power, and then destroy the Roman oppressors forever – these were troublesome words.

Six days later, Jesus took three of the disciples: Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain where they had an experience that can only be described as divinely supernatural. This is the kind of God-experience that people long to have – or at least we say we’d like to hear and see something amazing like this. In reality, it would scare the living daylights out of us. There is really no human analogy I can offer you that might explain what happened on this day.

We don’t really understand what happened. It involved light and A Voice and terrifying brilliance. All Peter could say at first was:

It is good for us to be here.

As things became *more* supernatural, Peter wisely stopped talking altogether.

The three disciples had fallen to the ground – terrified. But Jesus told them to get up and not be afraid.

///

¹ Matthew 14:13ff, Matthew 15:32ff

² Matthew 14:34-36, Matthew 15:29-31

³ Matthew 15:1-50

⁴ Matthew 16:25

You wouldn't call Jesus "a glutton for power." A glutton for *punishment* – maybe, but not a glutton for power. He who would not only subject himself to flogging and crucifixion – but would even refuse the myrrh that would sedate him a little to ease his pain on the cross.⁵

But Jesus was never about earthly power. In fact, it looks like he was trying to tell his followers that pain was coming:

Look: weak is the new strong.

This isn't about grabbing the power away from the Romans.

This isn't about destroying the powers that oppress us with earthly force.

This is about something dazzling and awesome and otherworldly.

This is about sacrifice.

If we keep reading this chapter, we'll find Jesus explaining to the disciples that *he* will have to suffer at the hands of the hands of the earthly powers. *He* will have to make a sacrifice.

///

We enter the season of Lent this week, and as the bulletin tells you, the sermons during Lent will be on The Seven Deadly Sins. This is not a Biblical list – actually St. Thomas Aquinas is one of those who is credited with coming up with these seven. And one of those sins is gluttony – something most of us consider to involve an eating disorder rather than a sin – something "deadly" to be sure, but only because it will damage your *physical* health, not your *spiritual* health.

And yet, gluttony – usually defined as the over-consumption of food – is about the inability to make a sacrifice for the sake of ourselves and others. (Eating more than our share – at least in ancient times – meant that we were keeping the needy from getting *their* fair share.)

At best, gluttony is unattractive. I think of images like Morgan Spurlock cramming Big Macs into his mouth in the movie "Super Size Me" or the pious mayor in the movie "Chocolat" who gorges himself on chocolate until he passes out in the picture window on Main Street.

⁵ Matthew 27:34

But at worst, gluttony is about focusing our whole lives on what we will consume next. It's about the inability to stop filling ourselves with that which does not satisfy. It's about the inability to *relish the bite in our mouths* because we are already thinking about going after the ten bites that are still in front of us.

///

Peter could not relish the dazzling moment when Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were radiantly before him. Before he could wait to see what would happen next, Peter was already leaping into the project of building tents for all three of them. He could not relish the moment because he was already jumping ahead to what would happen next.

But to follow Jesus was not about gorging on power and majesty. It was not about building something great!

Following Jesus was more about waiting. Holding back. Eventually, it would be about making personal sacrifices, even sacrificing our lives.

This is not what we want to hear. We want feasts and Fat Tuesday. We want lights and heavenly Voices.

But what if the Heavenly Voice is telling us to *listen to someone who says that if we want to save our lives, we must lose them?*

Is Jesus a glutton for punishment? He certainly isn't a glutton for power.

///

We live in a culture that relishes – not the single bite – but the whole menu. We don't have to look any farther than the Super Bowl which has become not a game, not even a whole day of festivities, but two weeks of analysis and interviews and briefings and parties. **We aren't enjoying a single game; we are diving into a feast of competition with historical ramifications.** Patriots fans are thinking, "It's good for us to be here." This is the season that they will talk about for generations. (Or so they think.)

But some will eat and drink so much tonight they won't remember much to pass on to the next generation. Some will not relish this night; they will be looking ahead to the next thing. Going to Disney World?

Some will focus on the commercials and miss the game completely. Some will not even care about the game.

But at its *purest*, this will be about sacrifice – giving up the body for a greater cause, following a leader who was born to lead.

The Super Bowl analogy is trite and ridiculous really, compared to the glory of God displayed at the Transfiguration. But the truth is that no human words can describe this glory, this moment.

All we know is that we who are weak and tired, we who worry about the future, we who are caught up in power struggles, we who are stressed are looking for a Savior, and the odd thing is that our Savior says, "If you want to save your life, you must lose it." It's not something we can really understand.

///

In a culture where excess is the norm, it's odd that we are fed spiritually by a small piece of bread and just enough wine to wet that small piece of bread. That's all it takes to be filled with God's Spirit.

Because Jesus came not to indulge himself but to give sacrificially. We who want to follow him are asked to do the same. As we enter this Lenten season, this is a good time to relish this small piece of bread and watch intently and listen carefully for the One who has come and is here and is coming again.