

February 26, 2017

The Trauma of Transfiguration

Annette Hill Briggs

Luke 9:37-50

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

⁴⁹ John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

I expect lots of you have seen [The Danish Girl](#), about a 20th-century Danish landscape painter named Einer Wegener and his wife, Greta. Over several years, Einer slowly, painfully and necessarily becomes Lily, a woman. Except that he doesn't become Lily. Because she always was Lily on the inside. Her brain and spirit were Lily, not Einer. When she went about as Einer, she was in costume. Einer was fiction. Lily was true.

The entire movie looks like a painting. All the colors soft and the characters like portraits of real people, as if to take the edge off the pain and the sadness Lily and Greta are going through.

I don't pretend to understand it. The closest I come is trying to imagine pretending to be right-handed ALL the time, instead of left. Or wearing glasses for far-sightedness even though I'm nearsighted. And then having to do that for a lifetime. Of course I could adapt – thrive, even. But the energy and effort I would spend, every waking moment, to overcome the difference between who I am and who I present myself to be...? In doing so, how much of my life is no longer available – for enjoying this world? for loving other people? for doing good work?

Transfiguration Sunday, it seems to me, is as good a Sunday as any to correct the fundamental wrongness of people in pain finding more grace at the movies than they do at church – and a better Sunday than most, since on this Sunday we read the text where Jesus reveals HIS own true self to his disciples. Turns out, he's not entirely who they thought he was – a Galilean carpenter rabbi. What was he? An angel? A ghost? A celestial being? He dazzled and glowed. He time-travelled and talked like old friends with men long dead.

People who thought they knew him were flabbergasted – but not speechless, sadly. Not a thought in their heads, and yet their tongues did not fail. They didn't make any sense, of course, but they just kept talking. ANYTHING to fill the space between what they thought they knew about the world, about reality, and what they were seeing before their very eyes.

Friends, I want to invite you to imagine that on this mountaintop in Luke 9, Jesus didn't transfigure into someone he had never been before. But rather, here in this moment on this mountain the disciples see, *we* see, Jesus as he always was – *who* Jesus most essentially, most truly was and IS. They saw, we see, that when he went about as a Galilean carpenter rabbi, *then* he was in disguise, *then* he was in costume: a put-on, temporary version of himself, a disguise necessary for the needs of others.

Neither identity was fiction. Fiction is for books and movies. He was altogether Christ, all the time. One disciple for sure, probably others, had moments of extreme clarity, moments in which they themselves knew precisely who Jesus was. “*You are the Messiah of God,*” Peter says in verse 20. Peter knew. And yet, he didn't know WHAT he knew – nor what it meant nor what he was supposed to do about it. This *transfiguration* of Jesus was for the disciples a *compression* of the reality they could not grasp into the reality they could.

Are you with me?

The transfiguration of Christ is a gift to them and to the church. But it comes to them – here, in the beginning – as a problem, a difficulty of discipleship. By way of grace, I want to suggest that this difficulty of discipleship is something like a 3-year-old who can't read. Her illiteracy is not the result of bad morals or personal weakness. She can't read because her brain isn't ready to read. Because so far people have read to her, not begun to teach her to read for herself. It's an issue of brain development and a

lack of training. No more than we are born knowing how to read, do we come to accept the gospel of Christ knowing how to believe and/or how to obey.

A baby Christian is no more aware of what the power of Christ in him is capable of, than a 3-year-old human knows what her brain is capable of. And think about it: we are baby Christians for SO much longer than we are baby humans. As long as someone is feeding her, a baby human grows and grows.

But a baby Christian can only ever feed himself. Pray his own prayers; immerse himself in the Word; read, attend Bible study; worship, serve, suffer, give. Jesus never force-fed his disciples. THE only growth a Christian ever knows is from what he himself **chooses** off the table before him. What he puts inside his heart, mind, and soul. And then practice. Flex. Strengthen.

A five-year-old human looks nothing like his newborn self, a 15-year-old nothing like he did at five. How different a Christian are you now than five years ago? ten years ago? So it's with lots and lots of sympathy that I watch these disciples watch Jesus the next day, when the man asks Jesus to heal his son saying, *"I asked your disciples but they couldn't do it."* To which Jesus responds – not so kindly, in my opinion – *"Good Lord, how much longer do I have to put up with this faithless and perverse generation?"* The answer being, of course, *"Uh, well, forever, it would appear."*

Because – watch what Luke says happens next. Just as Jesus was about to heal him, the boy fell into another seizure. So Jesus rebuked the demon, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. The whole crowd was amazed, and Jesus turned to his disciples – suggesting to me, maybe they were not as amazed as the crowd. They'd seen healings lots of times by now. They'd healed people themselves, too. And, given the stunt they'd seen Jesus do up the mountain, maybe they were getting harder to impress.

At that very moment, Jesus turned to them particularly to say, *"Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands."* No sooner have they not really gotten the lesson of transfiguration, than Jesus is on to another one! This is discipleship, friends, as Jesus would have it: lesson on top of lesson; us trying to keep up.

So did they? Did the words sink into their ears? Nope. As Luke says, the spirit prevented their understanding. Jesus' words scared them so badly, they were too afraid to ask what he meant. Instead they started an argument about which one of themselves was the greatest. Why did they do that? Just because we are baby Christians doesn't mean we aren't also still baby humans. And what do we humans do when we are afraid? We get mad and/or we get mean. And one of the things we do when we are being mad and mean is to pick fights that don't matter.

Why? I think maybe we pick fights that don't matter, that we CAN win, because we are so afraid of losing the ones that *do* matter. And for some of us, sometimes, the big fight we feel like we are losing is this fight between what we have always thought – or been

taught, or believed – is the rock bottom truth of the universe and some new reality that has come along that we cannot make sense of: that seems new but maybe isn't; that feels true but also scary; for which we don't have the language we need, to talk about the confusion and the tension we feel.

It's a kind of spiritual trauma, from which we freeze and then solidify, or we grow. Sometimes what Jesus needs us to hear escapes us – not because we aren't smart, but because we are so young in the faith, and we don't understand that this confusion and tension is precisely the experience by which believers grow. It feels icky. Edgy. I sometimes feel so pressed and pushed to change that it hurts. I want to shout, "Why can't I just stay here?!"

I read this tidbit of secular, organizational advice awhile back. I got it for free but would have paid for it – it's that brilliant.

*"If you don't know what the most important thing to do is,
Figuring that out IS the most important thing to do."*

The disciples have been through a crazy two days – call it *transfiguration* or call it *trauma*. They were struggling. They pick a stupid fight and Jesus, their pre-school pastor, steps in with a human preschooler at his side – an actual little kid – a prop for teaching the spiritual babies what to do when they are so overwhelmed they don't know what they are supposed to do next. *"Whoever welcomes this kid in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."*

Daddies loved their kids of course. But the fact remains that in those days, serving kids, caring for kids, bending one's own life around the needs of kids was women's business. And no one would have considered *serving kids* the same as *serving God*. And as it has to do with our spiritual traumas, I hear the text – Jesus through the text – saying, *When you don't know what to do, when you feel overwhelmed, when you are tempted NOT to grow, consider this your fail-safe choice: do right by a kid*. Do right by someone who can't pay you back, is how he says it in other places.

For me, it's always, always, always Kindness. Just be kind. Gently kind. Cheerfully kind. Kindfully kind. When I feel shocked or surprised or overwhelmed, *kind* still works. When I don't know what to say, *kind* still works. When one is **being kind** – in the actual ACT of kindness – there, friends, is clarity. Not just kindness: also generosity and service and study. A clarity that does not come to me in the midst of trauma.

But, mysteriously, clarity is propelled by the spiritual traumas natural to our faith: crises, griefs, doubts. Even the collision of old realities with truth that is brand new to us: *Transfiguration*, as we call it on this particular Sunday of the year.