

Message for Transfiguration of Our Lord, Year B (2/14/2021)
Mark 9:2-9

Do you remember when John Franklin Stephens was transfigured before our eyes? In 2012, a well-known political commentator used the R-word to refer to a candidate during a presidential debate, setting off a significant backlash. Of the myriad responses to her tweet, none shone brighter than that of John Franklin Stephens, or “Frank,” a Special Olympics athlete and disability advocate, who published an open letter the next day:

I’m a 30 year old man with Down syndrome who has struggled with the public’s perception that an intellectual disability means that I am dumb and shallow. I am not either of those things, but I do process information more slowly than the rest of you. In fact it has taken me all day to figure out how to respond to your use of the R-word last night....

After I saw your tweet, I realized you... assumed that people would understand and accept that being linked to someone like me is an insult and you assumed you could get away with it....

Well... you, and society, need to learn that being compared to people like me should be considered a badge of honor.

No one overcomes more than we do and still loves life so much.

Come join us someday at Special Olympics. See if you can walk away with your heart unchanged.

A friend you haven’t made yet,

John Franklin Stephens
Global Messenger
Special Olympics Virginia¹

¹ specialolympicsblog.wordpress.com/2012/10/23/an-open-letter-to-ann-coulter/.

In a few hundred words, Frank Stephens bore his whole, true self to the world. Beaming with self-assurance, he pushed back against bullying and reclaimed the dignity of persons with disabilities, all while preserving the humanity of the person who had so casually scorned him. In a word, he dazzled.

Frank's story has something to do with the meaning of Transfiguration. As I reflect on the famous account in our Gospel from Mark today, I'm mindful of the difference between transfiguration and transformation. We may use those terms interchangeably, but there's an important distinction. To be transformed means to be fundamentally changed, to be altered in composition or structure. But, to be transfigured means to be changed in outward form or appearance only. As one commentator observes, "Jesus on the mountain with Moses and Elijah is not transformed (changed inwardly) but transfigured before his disciples (shown to be other than assumed)."² In other words, **the Transfiguration casts Jesus in a new light, revealing to Peter, James, and John who he really is; it's not a change in Jesus' identity, but in the disciples' perception.** In a flash, they see and hear the truth: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

It's no accident that the disciples bear witness to this great epiphany at this moment in Mark's Gospel. Jesus has only just predicted his suffering and death for the first time, causing fear and confusion among his companions. Not only that, he's invited them into the way of sacrifice, too: "If any want to become my

² Melinda Quivik, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-92-9-5.

followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”³ But, if Peter, James, and John are suddenly uncertain about this movement they’ve joined, they’re about to get a shot in the arm. **The Transfiguration clarifies what the cross will appear to conceal, that Jesus is a trustworthy Messiah, God’s own Beloved, the prime agent of God’s reign on Earth as in heaven. In the words of one interpreter, this mountaintop epiphany is “the revelation of Jesus’ mysterious, transcendent dignity.”**⁴

Transcendent dignity. That’s a good way to describe Frank Stephens, too. That’s a good way to describe anyone whose authentic self is on full display, whose true identity is unmistakable to the world. Transcendent dignity – transcendent not in the sense of being above or beyond, but rather God-given, supremely genuine. Maybe you know someone like that, a person who embraces their true nature regardless of the expectations of others, and whose self-love translates naturally to love for others. They just shine.

According to a colleague of mine, that’s the goal of the work for participants in her program at the Center for Courage and Renewal in Seattle: “We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves whole.... As we deepen the congruence between our inner and outer lives, we show up more fully in... key relationships and events... increasing our capacity to be authentic and

³ 8:34.

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 316.

courageous in life and work.”⁵ That’s transfiguration. As Saint Irenaeus of Lyon famously put it: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

Friends, appearances can be deceiving. **The story of Jesus’**

Transfiguration is an invitation to witness the glorious truth about ourselves and others, that each of us radiates a transcendent dignity, that each of us is beloved for who we really are. Pastor and author Mihee Kim-Kort explains why she keeps showing up to serve at a shelter in her community despite her discomfort:

I need to be regularly and blatantly impressed with the miracle of humanity all around me, to realize that the people in front of me are my people and not “those people” I show up to be reminded that my humanity is not dependent on what I wear or how I smell or what I think or see, but is rooted in the *imago Dei* as I experience it always in radical connection to those around me.⁶

Transfiguration is about being “impressed with the miracle of humanity all around,” the beautiful complexity of our true selves in relationship to one another. Beloved, God grant you the grace to shine for the people you encounter, and eyes to see how they shine for you.

⁵ Julie Scheer Johnson, Preaching Peace Tacoma, 2/9/2021.

⁶ *Outside the Lines*, 64.