

Disposable People
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Mark 3:7-10
Mark 9:2-9

As we stand at the threshold of Lent, there is no better vantage point than the mount of Transfiguration—a kind of continental divide for Jesus and his band of followers. Behind them lies a panoramic view of the Jordan baptism, the wilderness temptation and a powerful Galilean ministry of healing, teaching and community building; ahead the road to Jerusalem and beyond. Behind them lies idealism, excitement, confidence and high hopes; ahead reality sets in and so does confrontation, fear and despair. But there is no turning back; forward is the only way to go.

As they stand on the mount of Transfiguration, an amazing spectacle unfolds. At Jesus' invitation, Peter, James and John join him at the highest part of the mountain. Mark tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them, *"his clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking to Jesus."* The law, the prophets and the new covenant, huddled together, conversing. About what we can only imagine.

The other three—Peter, James and John—are literally terrified. They don't know what to say or do, except for Peter who rarely seems at a loss for words. Peter, of course, understands nothing of what is going on. As if to underscore his confusion, he blurts out a proposal to construct three dwellings or tents for each figure. He wants to hang on to what is happening here and now and not let it go.

But a cloud descends upon Moses, Elijah and Jesus, and a voice forcefully, thunderously intercedes: *"This is my... Beloved; listen to him!"* Listen to him—advice each of us should heed—every day or our lives. Listen to him!

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah, the Voice and the cloud disappear and Peter, James and John are left alone with Jesus. They head down the mountain to join the rest of their cadre and go in the only direction they truly can—forward, onward to Jerusalem, toward the betrayal and agonizing death—and, although only Jesus apprehends it, toward resurrection as well. And that's exactly what Jesus tells them as they climb down. He ordered them, commanded them, to tell no one anything about what they had just seen—

until he has risen from the dead. But did they listen to him, as the Voice so powerfully exhorted? Well, partially so. They did keep the matter to themselves. But they didn't really get it, the part about rising from the dead. What can that mean, they wonder, what can that mean?

There is so much we could meditate upon in this moment of transfiguration; so many different sermons could be preached trying to mine its gold. But this morning I just want to focus on one word: transfiguration. The word here translated “*transfigured*” is *metamorphoo* in Greek, the origin of our metamorphosis, meaning to change form or shape, to become something different. As the ugly larva is transfigured into a beautiful butterfly, as Jesus was transfigured into his glory, so the follower of Jesus is to be transfigured into something new, reshaped into a new creation, re-formed into a citizen of the coming kingdom of God.

There is one aspect of our transfiguration that I want to examine this morning, something that fits well the Lenten tradition of self-examination. A few years ago theologian and church historian Martin Marty addressed 3,000 people at Eastern Mennonite University's commencement ceremony. In his talk, Marty played with a French noun popularized by the French existentialist Garbriel Marcel (Gäbrēel' Märsel'). The word, and I hope I come moderately close to pronouncing it correctly, is *disponibilité* (dis pōn' a bill ē tā) and it means, quite simply, disposable or being available. The disposable person that Marty encouraged these young graduates to be was someone who, in our self-serving world, he said, gives herself or himself unreservedly to others, to be available to anyone in need. By contrast, he continued, the indisposable person is self-preoccupied, encumbered, self-enclosed, and incapable of giving to others, except in rare circumstances. Disposable people have a readiness for the other and are available for the other, to give oneself to the need at hand, to be fully present to need outside of themselves.

In 1974 Thomas Klise published his first and only novel, entitled “The Last Western.” In our early Sojourners' days, we all read it, devoured it really, and spent many hours talking, discussing its impact on what was emerging among us. Set decades into the future, “The Last Western” relates the life of Willie, a multi-racial athlete, born into poverty in an obscure corner of the U.S. Southwest whose grandparents are Irish, Native American, Chinese and African-American. Willie is a rainbow coalition all by himself.

Two powerful forces drive Willie's life: his competitive athleticism and a deeply searching spirituality. While he eventually stars as a young and phenomenal major league pitcher, it is his spiritual journey that determines who he becomes. No one seems to understand the burdens and questions he carries.

As a young boy, one day Willie enters a church to see what a church is. He observes a man inside the church, up near the ceiling. The man is hanging on a cross. Willie goes home and asks his mother who the man is and why he is on the cross. His mother says that he is Jesus the Lord and he is dying. The next day Willie returns to the church taking along a ladder. He climbs up to Jesus and gives him a glass of water. But that Jesus cannot swallow and the water spills down, leaving a large water stain on his chest. Just then the priest enters the sanctuary, sees what Willie has done, and orders him to leave and never to come back.

Years later, Willie goes to seminary to study and to enter the ministry. Seminaries of the future are certainly different than the one I attended. This seminary has an amazing computer in which is stored all the theological knowledge of the ages. Each student is given a chance to go to the computer once a week to ask a question. On his first turn at the computer, Willie asks a question that has troubled him for years. He asks: What is the pain of God? That one question causes the computer to crash. All the wisdom of the ages cannot handle this question about the pain of God. Willie is banned from ever using the computer again.

The part of the novel I liked most involves a band of eccentric believers—many would call them a sect—who impacted Willie's life and spiritual journey far more than the seminary or its computer ever did. After a disaster has destroyed his Houston neighborhood and killed his entire family, Willie is found unconscious by two bearded men and taken to their dwelling place to care for him. As he slowly recovers, Willie gradually sees that he has been taken in by an unusual religious order made up of men, women and children who wear ragtag clothing, speak little and live very, very simply. I love the name of their order. They named themselves The Silent Servants of the Used, Abused and Utterly Screwed Up. It's not surprising that the Vatican refused to recognize them.

They live to serve those who society ignores. In a little document Willie finds, their purposes include: taking the places of those serving prison terms; befriending fools and victims of fools; serving

uselessly the used; filling emptiness; compassioning and identifying. They try to heal wounds, both the physical ones and the wounds of emotional abuse. They aren't much at keeping records and no one knows who their founder is, though Willie discovers some guesses have been scribbled down in the margins of the document. Someone has written the capital letter J, another the word "Him" and yet another "The Lord."

Willie's spiritual journey eventually leads him to become the most unlikely of choices to become the first American pope. But his passion to bring unity, justice and peace to the world ends in his martyrdom, as it so often has for true prophets.

Marty would probably call The Silent Servants of the Used, Abused and Utterly Screwed Up disposable people. They made themselves available to the needs they encountered at whatever cost that would bring them.

So many of us here today already live very much like disposable people. Through the vast array of nonprofits represented by those in this congregation, through the various professional roles that many of us play in the legal, academic, economic, government and public health spheres, through parenting and care for children, through voluntary service, the International Guest House, Warm Nights, Community Café and in many other ways we truly make ourselves available to the many in need. I want to strongly affirm the many ways we are living the lives of disposable people.

But as I prepared for this sermon over the past couple of weeks, I have not been able to shake three nagging questions—questions whose answers I still struggle to grasp. Perhaps that's the nature of spiritual growth. Each time we take a step in deepening our life of faith and dependence upon God and not the world around us, we see more steps that need to be taken. I want to conclude my sermon by sharing those nagging questions with you. Maybe you will be able to help me with some of their answers.

The first question has to do with our life together here at Hyattsville Mennonite: How well do we individually let others be available to us? We are strong and capable people who reach out to others in need in the congregation and beyond, who want to be available for each other in whatever way is possible. But, I feel, many if not most of us are hesitant to let our own need be known. It's not easy for us to be vulnerable, to acknowledge our own weakness and need and to ask someone else to be available to us. How can we open ourselves to let our own need be known?

The second question has to do with our place in the global Mennonite community: What might it mean for us as a church to be more available to our Mennonite sisters and brothers in the global South? We have an important sister church relationship with a congregation of displaced people in Sincelejo, Colombia, and a couple of us may be going down there to visit them later this spring as part of an Ecumenical Delegation. We financially support Mennonite Mission Network and Mennonite Central Committee. A good number of us have even served with MMN and MCC throughout the world. A few of us have been part of Christian Peacemaker Teams delegations in different parts of the world and Jenny Dillon is in Colombia with CPT right now. But the part that nags at me is the huge wealth gap between those of us in the global North and our sisters and brothers in the global South. I have said it before and I want to say it again: 72% of Mennonites worldwide live in the global South, but only 5% of Mennonite wealth worldwide resides in the global South. What can we as a congregation do, in our own way, to help right that imbalance? How can Hyattsville Mennonite be available to these sisters and brothers in a way that addresses their need and that disparity more fully? I would certainly like to see us more concretely identify with our global sisters and brothers and to see more of our giving go to the work of Mennonite World Conference and other ways that perhaps we can address in next year's fiscal budget. But I suspect that's not all we can do.

And the third nagging question is similar but from the perspective of each of us as citizens of the United States: What might it mean for us as individuals to make ourselves available to the global underdeveloped world? Daryl Byler, Director of the MCC Washington Office, recently addressed this question in MC USA's Peace Signs electronic magazine. He reminded us that with only 4% of the world's population, we consume more than three times our share of the world's resources, produce a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide emissions and account for more than half of the world's military expenditures. Whether we like it or not, we are part of that reality.

Daryl then asked this question: What difference might it make if the United States consumed less and shared more? I doubt that there is anyone in this room who has not asked themselves how they can consume less and share more and changed lifestyle accordingly. But I can't shake the fact that, at least for me, there's much more to do. Perhaps God is not calling me to live like one of The Silent Servants of the

Used, Abused and Utterly Screwed Up, but I do feel pulled by the Spirit to go deeper. But what does that mean?

I know this is going to be an area of self-examination for me this Lent. Where do I resist being a disposable person the way Jesus was? How can I use my gifts more fully and make my time more available for the needs that surround me here at home and around the world? I don't think God calls us to be satisfied with where we are. To whom much has been given, much will be asked.

I want to close with a few words from Jim Wallis that he gave to students and faculty at Eastern Mennonite University earlier this week because I think it speaks right to this point. Jim said, *"People of faith have to make a choice between hope and cynicism. Cynicism is a buffer against commitment and leads to despair. Rather rise to the challenge of using your God-given gifts in the crushing needs around you—that's what changes history."*