

“Whatever is commendable...”

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on the Eighth Sunday of Epiphany
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 26, 2017

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Philippians 4:8

Here’s a little word trivia fact for you as we begin this last time of reflection on the words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. This one verse is the only time, *the only time*, the word “commendable” appears in the entire Bible – at least according to Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. That may or may not be accurate, given that biblical translations can differ widely on how some words are translated. But, even if “commendable” appears more than just once in the Bible, it is certainly not commonly used. Why would that be the case, do you suppose? Could it be the translators got it wrong? Or was Paul trying to get at something very nuanced, but very specific? Whatever the case, this word “commendable” is surely worthy of our closer attention this morning.

When I was planning out this sermon series, I did not realize that this particular topic would fall on this particular Sunday in the liturgical calendar. And this is a specific, if not as well known, liturgical Sunday known as Transfiguration Sunday, observed in our tradition the Sunday before Lent begins. “Transfiguration” is

obviously a church word, although if you look it up in the dictionary, you realize it does have usages outside of the church. It just doesn't happen very often. We would be more likely to say someone was transformed by their new hair color or the house was transformed by the new siding than to say either had been "transfigured." That's because "transfiguration" has a subtler meaning to it than transformation. If something is transfigured, it changes in appearance, yes; but in a process that unfolds like a metamorphosis. In other words, the change is more than skin deep. It is more than just a change in outward physical appearance. It is an all-encompassing change from one thing into a totally new and different thing.

In the story of the Transfiguration in Matthew which we read a few minutes ago, we find the basic outline of this very unique and unusual occurrence involving Jesus, three of his most trusted disciples and two additional visitors. So, let's review: In this story, who was transfigured? [Jesus] How do we know? [Face shone like the sun, clothes dazzling white] Who were the disciples with him? [Peter, James and John] Who were the additional visitors? [Moses and Elijah] Interesting to note is that the disciples could see that Jesus, Moses and Elijah were talking but they could not hear what they were saying. And we have to wonder, why Moses and Elijah? Why those two and not Abraham or David or Isaiah or Jeremiah one of the other patriarchs of

Judaism? That one is actually easier to understand. Moses symbolized the Law, i.e, the Ten Commandments which he received from God on Mt. Sinai. Elijah symbolized the Prophets, all those special spokespeople God appointed over the years to carry God's word to the people. Another unique commonality between Moses and Elijah was they are the only two people in the Bible to have face to face communication directly with God. Moses spoke with God directly on Mt. Sinai and in the Tent of the Presence, and his face shone because of those encounters. Elijah too encountered God directly when God placed him in the crack in the side of the mountain while God walked by. That's when Elijah realized God was not in the earthquake or in the wind but in the sheer silence.

So, let's go back to the disciples. Jesus asked them to go up on the mountain with him and they did. It's not clear from this text why Jesus wanted to go up on the mountain but in Luke's version of the story it's to pray. No explanation is given as to why it's these three disciples Jesus chose, although it's no surprise Peter was among them. And it's also no surprise that Peter just jumps right into the middle of this odd situation and immediately wants to do something – building some sort of dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Why? Who knows? It could have been that he hoped this incredible moment would just go on and on so long they would need a place to stay. Or, it could have been that

Peter, who was a doer and not a thinker, just needed to do something active. Or, most likely, it was a little of both. But then what happens?

Before Jesus could say anything, a cloud descends and a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” At least in Matthew that’s what the voice says. In Mark, it says “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And in Luke it says, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” A couple of things are interesting here. First, the cloud. Every time Moses spoke with God, a cloud descended and enveloped them both. That’s how the people knew that Moses and God were having a chat. And with Elijah, he asked to see God and that’s when God came to him in a cloud, put him in the cleft of the rock, and passed by. Also, Elijah didn’t die like other people. Instead, he ascended to heaven in a chariot on a cloud. So, the presence of the cloud in this story is meant to let us know that this is the real deal. God is really present. But why? Why did this happen?

I confess I’ve always wondered about that. Why did Moses and Elijah show up to talk with Jesus? Were they just hanging out, these three incredibly unusual people with unique connections to the Almighty? After all, they are a one-of-a-kind group. Did God just want Jesus to know he wasn’t alone in the challenging tasks God had placed before him? Or was Jesus just showing off in front of the disciples? That’s unlikely. More likely

is that Jesus was getting tired and worn down and scared. He was starting to figure out that all he was doing, all God was asking him to do, was not going to end well. So, Jesus went up on the mountain to pray, just like he always did because he always went to God with his problems. And he asked some of the disciples to come with him, just like he always did, probably because he felt they needed time away to pray too. Once they were there, God realized Jesus needed encouragement so God sent Moses and Elijah along to provide it. And who better, really. What do you suppose they said to him in the few minutes they had to chat before the disciples freaked out? [Pause for responses.] I think it was probably something like, hang in there, kid. God is with you. God knows what God is doing and all you need to do is continue forward in faith, one step at a time. That's what we did and it worked.

But what about those disciples? Peter, in particular. He just could not leave well enough alone. He needed to DO something. And that did not go well. Why? Because God cut him off to remind him of who Jesus was. God told Peter, James and John, exactly what they needed to do and it wasn't building little houses for Moses and Elijah. Nope, they were to listen to Jesus. Just listen to Jesus. Not do something. Not worry about what they should be doing or what they would have been doing if they stayed home. They were just to listen to Jesus, and you can't listen if you

are talking or distracted by focusing on your own answers to whatever is happening. Just listen, God said. *Just listen.*

This brings us back where we started to the whole notion of what Paul might have meant when he talked about whatever is commendable as a necessary focus for living a Christian life. We, dear friends, are disciples of Jesus just like Peter, James and John. No, we didn't wander around Palestine with Jesus in the heat and the dust. We didn't watch him heal and teach and feed the hungry. We didn't hear him scold the religious leadership for their single-mindedness about how to love and honor God. Instead we are disciples in the sense Paul meant, the people who never met Jesus the man but nonetheless know and love Jesus for who He is – the Son of the living God who has revealed an entirely new way to love and serve God. Paul reminds us in his words to our ancient brothers and sisters in Philippi that we figure out how to live into reality this entirely new way to love and serve God by listening to and Jesus, carefully and intently in our lives each day. Then, we work hard to recognize and understand what Jesus is asking of us by watching for whatever is true, honorable, pure, and pleasing. And it is this effort, this commitment to the work of understanding what is needed to be transformed – no, *transfigured* -- into disciples of Jesus, that Paul commends to us.

To commend something to someone means to entrust it to their care for its preservation, to make sure they understand how

vital it is, how important it is, to life itself. Whatever is commendable, dear friends, is this work of Jesus, this life in pursuit of what it means to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as much as we love ourselves. *This life* is what Paul has commended to us. This is what Jesus has entrusted to us. This is, in fact, what makes us Christians.

So, it must be asked, what is commendable about you when it comes to living as a follower of Jesus? How does your life each day reveal that you know Jesus and you try to live as Jesus would want – pursuing whatever is true and honorable, searching for whatever is pure and pleasing, making the effort to accept Paul’s challenge to live a commendable life not just because it is excellent or praiseworthy which surely it is. No, dear friends, we are invited to accept Paul’s challenge to live a commendable life because it is the right thing to do, the only thing that matters, in making plain to God and others that we get it. We get what it is to be the people of God. We get what it is to turn the other cheek when others are mean and unkind. We get what it is to care for the least of these, even when the cost to us to do so might be dear. We get what it is to risk ridicule as the people who believe that God loves all of us beyond reason. We get that God does not put any qualifiers on who deserves our help. We get that, even though we understand what it is God asks of us, we will always fall short. And finally, we get that’s where grace enters in, God’s boundless

love that forgives our sin, picking us up, dusting us off and setting us on the path forward through life once more. Whatever is commendable is that which draws us forward into God's future, in spite of all the reasons we have to give up or turn around.

So, as Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday, I urge you, dear friends, to use this sacred season to think about how it is that Jesus might be inviting you into a new way of living and being. In what ways might Jesus be asking you to reconsider whatever is commendable or honorable or pure or pleasing? If you are a person, like Peter, who likes to DO things, how might prayer and Bible study and reflection be a part of God's plans for your transformation this year? And if you are someone more comfortable with praying and pondering on your own, how might tangible actions be more a part of God's plans for you this year? These are the questions I commend to you as we await the beginning of Lent this week. Consider stretching beyond your comfort zone this Lenten season as your personal preparation for the gift of new life we celebrate on Easter. Follow Paul's advice this Lent to think about these things, and see what develops. You just never know what might happen when you let go and let God. Amen.