

Billy Amoss: As if...

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Transfiguration Sunday

As if...

In the [Gospel reading for this week](#), Jesus takes some of his disciples with him to climb a high mountain where they can be alone, and there he is transformed before them. Matthew tells us that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Then the prophets, Moses and Elijah appear and talk to him. His disciples do not know what to say, they are so terrified. According to Mark, this terror overcomes them even before a cloud overshadows them and a voice from the cloud says, "This is my beloved son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

And then quite suddenly, everything is ordinary again. They look around and see no one with them anymore, **only** Jesus.

Imagine, only Jesus! How comforting that everything is normal again. And the disciples keep silent and tell no one of what they have seen.

In what we call the transfiguration, the disciples are brought into the fullness of Jesus' presence. They are given the grace to see the whole person, to see all of him, and when they do, they see his divine nature. How long did the experience last? We are not told, but it was clearly intense and terrifying. It happens without apparent warning, and ends suddenly. There is no transition, no bridge between the familiar, the expected and comprehensible course of events, the dailiness of life and this extraordinary experience. Of course, from our perspective, just about everything that the disciples witness during Jesus' ministry is extraordinary, but this event is

described as one that really sent them over the edge. And Jesus understands that the experience is overwhelming to his friends and shows compassion by touching them and saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

How much of the extraordinary are we able to handle as we meet one another in our daily lives? In our families, in this community, in the wider world, are we able to meet the other as a whole person, so that we break out of the ordinary and become alive in the full awareness of the wonder of our existence, indeed, the divine nature of our true selves? To put it in more "ordinary" language, can we wake up to the realization that we have depth and that life is immensely worth living?

How do we experience the depth of our being? Depth holds the unknown, and we may not like what we find. As we look around and see cruelty and violence, we need courage to trust that if we journey below the surface of who we are and look deeper, we can stand what we come up against, that someone will be there to hold us up, to bless us, to love us as we are, to touch us as Jesus touched his followers and drive away the fear.

I believe that the way we grow into the fullness of being is by suspending judgment of our neighbor and ourselves. By refusing to judge over the world, and ourselves, our biases and prejudices fall away. We see with fresh eyes and we are changed. We come alive to each other and know that we are connected through each other to the One who willed us into being. Judgment, on the other hand, separates us. It divides us between good and evil; it is the we/they worldview that causes so much conflict and suffering.

Refusing to judge does not mean being blind to injustice and cruelty but is in fact the way that Jesus taught us to heal the world. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves." For when we refuse to judge, we allow love into our hearts, and love heals.

When I was a child in Germany we were good friends with the family next door. My brothers and I were close to the parents as well as their children, and we remain close friends to this day. The parents have never hidden the fact that they were enthusiastic Nazis during the war. How could this be? Such warm people who have shown us great kindness, and yet they had been part of this evil movement.

Two years ago I read a New York Times book review of the first comprehensive medical and psychological biography of Hitler. Most people think of Hitler as a madman, someone who could have committed such unspeakable evil only as a result of being mentally ill. The author of the biography, a respected neurologist and psychiatrist, concludes that Hitler most likely was not truly mentally ill, that most of his personality functioned more than adequately, and that he knew what he was doing and chose to do it with pride and enthusiasm.

Do we really have to accept that this man was not just a monster, that he was not all that different from the rest of us? On a more personal level, why does my life have to be complicated by loving some of the very people who supported him?

I appreciated very much the quote from the Russian author, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, in the email from Alan Storey that Kathy sent us last week. Solzhenitsyn, who suffered years of deprivation and degradation in Soviet labor camps, and who has every right to feel victimized and lash out at his persecutors, says:

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

So we are all in need of healing. And if it is love that heals, then perhaps by loving the parents of my German friends and not judging them, I have known them at the level of our common humanity. At that level, we belong to each other.

Jesus was often criticized for consorting with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other disreputable sorts. "He has gone to stay at a sinner's house," the crowd calls out when Jesus chooses to stay at the house of Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector. Jesus never judges this man. He greets this stranger like a trusted friend. Though he has never met him before, he calls him by name: "**Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today.**" And Zacchaeus hurries down and welcomes him with joy. With joy! Is this how you meet someone who is judging you? Jesus has greeted not the wealthy tax collector whom the crowd has condemned but the person who is so eager to see him that he has climbed a tree because he is too short to see from the crowd. This wealthy man risked looking ridiculous hanging from the branch of a sycamore tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by. But Jesus recognizes him as a friend. "**Zacchaeus,**" he says. And what happens then? Zacchaeus is healed. He gladly gives up half of his wealth to the poor and offers to pay back fourfold those whom he may have cheated. Jesus has allowed Zacchaeus to shed the constricting identity given him by his fellow townspeople and called him into the fullness of the person whom God created. Zacchaeus is made whole.

I think it is important to recognize that growing into the fullness of being is an active process. Though grace plays a crucial role, we must also do our part. It doesn't just happen to us. Zacchaeus risks ridicule just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. And when Jesus invites him to become more than he has ever been, he responds with joy.

Suspending judgment for the sake of becoming authentic requires discipline. Recently I was in Russia. One evening, our group of doctors and health officials was invited to the

house of a couple who lived in the village where we had spent the day visiting schools and clinics. Now it was time to celebrate. Our hosts lived in an unusually large house, by local standards. They greeted us warmly and led us into a large kitchen, where there was a long table that seemed to groan under the weight of the many dishes and bottles of champagne and vodka that awaited us. Of the 20 or so people gathered at the house, I knew perhaps four well. Most were strangers. Before dinner the master of the house invited the men to enjoy the bania, a Russian-style sauna that he had built himself and that was in a separate small building behind the main house. The women would follow the men.

The bania, always made entirely of wood, consists of a small anteroom where there are towels and a table and chairs for relaxation, and a larger room with the sauna itself, heated by a wood burning stove to a very high temperature. There are bowls of water for washing. And in one of the bowls, soaking in hot water, are bunches of birch twigs with leaves that are picked in the early fall when the twigs are supple and the leaves are still soft. The first thing you do when entering a bania is to take off all of your clothes. (My friend, Anatoly, told me that he loves banias because people are the most honest when they are naked together.) Then you enter the sauna, get very hot, take turns beating each other with the hot leafy ends of the birch twigs until it seems your blood has reached the boiling point, then rush outside and roll in the snow, and quickly come inside to relax in the dressing room around the table with your companions before going back into the sauna for a second and sometimes third round. Afterwards the physical sense of well-being is close to bliss.

We were eight men. As we sat around the table in the anteroom room between rounds in the sauna and engaged in quiet conversation, I felt as if I was among trusted friends. I say "as if," because most of us were strangers, and yet we talked and sat together in intimacy. This intimacy felt very natural

and yet was so extraordinary, because it was so different from my daily experiences. I felt a profound sense of joy. Late that evening, as we were making our way by car back to the city where we were staying, I asked Nicolai, a friend of longstanding who had been with us, whether he thought our host was an honest man. After all, he lived in a very nice house, and yet he had been an ordinary sailor in Soviet times and his wife worked as a nurse. Nicolai answered that he had no idea; he would have to have more information about the man. The question, if it had entered his mind at all, had not been important to him. Yet I was prepared to judge a man in whose house only a little while before I had been a guest and to whom I had felt deeply connected. So it took only moments to revert back to being a judge over others, to breaking the tie that links us to each other as children of God. I had already forgotten what happens when we withhold judgment and meet one another **as if** we were trusted friends.

I would like to invite all of us to practice meeting one another **as if** we were trusted friends. I say **as if**, not so that we can pretend that we love each other, but as encouragement to let go of preconceived notions and let God open our minds and hearts. Choose a moment, don't rush it, and pay attention. Be prayerful – as a reminder that whatever happens is not entirely up to us. Later, reflect on the experience, perhaps by journaling. Then take courage – and try it again.

I am no expert at making connections. I am looking for encouragement from you, my faith community, to live more in this way of being awake and connected, to come out of my small world so that I can become more like the person God created me to be. This cannot be done alone.

Some in our community can help us to extend ourselves beyond the human world to connect to the inanimate and animate, to all of creation. The urgency of connecting to the earth becomes more apparent every day.

We can never know one another or ourselves the way the Psalmist says God knows the very essence of each of us. God has searched us and known us and there is nothing we can keep from God, for God knows even our thoughts before they are formed. Far from finding this distressing, the Psalmist marvels at being part of the wonder of all of God's creation and breaks into praise, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well." (Psalm 139) We are part of God's wonderful works and this, according to the Psalmist, is cause for celebration.

If being known to our very core by God is good news, then we can take courage that we can become authentically known to one another and not stand condemned. We can have the courage to meet one another **as if** we were trusted friends and be touched by God's healing presence. Perhaps then we, like Zacchaeus, will become more than we ever dreamed possible.