

***Sermon Series: The D/F Wrestling Match: Doubt vs. Faith***  
***“What Do You Want Me To Do?”***  
***2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6***  
***Salem United Methodist Church***  
***February 15, 2015***  
***Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling***

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we celebrate the glory of God shining on Jesus on the mountain. In the church it marks the halfway point between the birth of Christ and the Resurrection of Christ. Yes, spring is coming! The Transfiguration of Jesus is also the transition of his ministry to his journey to the cross. Thus we honor it on the Sunday before Lent begins. The Sundays in Epiphany we have been talking about wrestling with faith and doubt. I hope we have learned that as we ask the questions about our faith, as we express our doubt, Jesus is made known to us. Today we will see how Jesus was made known to three of his faithful disciples.

With this being Valentine’s weekend, much has been written and said about relationships, romance, and marriage. One segment talked about long distance relationships and how to make them work. Most of us have been separated from someone we have loved. There are high school sweethearts who go to different colleges. There are families who are separated because of military operations. And there are married couples who chose to live separately because of the location of their jobs and still maintain a marriage. What makes a long distance relationship work? The same as any other relationship, effective communication. Keeping in touch. Some of us remember when the only way to communicate with our loved ones who were not nearby was to write a letter. We spent hours writing down our most intimate thoughts to our loved ones and then walking the letter to the mail box. We also couldn’t wait for the mail carrier to bring a letter from our loved one. Sending a letter was far cheaper than a long distance phone call. Those were reserved for special occasions. Today with our modern technology, such as video chatting and texting, we can communicate on a constant basis with our loved ones no matter where they are in the world. We can also post pictures and videos such as a child’s first steps to a mother serving in Afghanistan. Technology bridges the long distance gap. It’s almost like being there. Keeping in touch keeps the relationship strong.

Jesus was one who understood this concept of the importance of communication in relationship building. He spent his entire three years of ministry building relationships through communicating with people and with God. Often after he was finished preaching to the crowds and healing their sick, he would take his disciples to a secluded spot to teach them more about what he was doing and who he was. It was in these more intimate conversations, Jesus built the trust of his disciples and they grew to love him. One relationship, however, that Jesus kept strong was the one he had with his Father in Heaven. The Gospels record him often leaving the disciples to go off and be alone with his heavenly Father. Probably Jesus could have talked with God anytime, anywhere, like we can in prayer. And Jesus probably did. Keeping in contact with God while he was preaching, healing, and training his disciples though might have been a little like multitasking. Have you ever tried to answer an email while talking on the phone? I find that I either don’t hear everything that is said, or I type something in the email that pertains to the phone conversation. We communicate best when we give our whole attention to one person at a time. So did Jesus. He needed that one-on-one, face time with God. Nothing keeps a relationship strong as having one-on-one time with the one you love. One time Jesus picked three disciples to go with him, Peter, James, and John. Scholars have questioned why Jesus picked these three. Where they his favorite? Where they the leaders of the others? Were they more mature in their understanding? Or perhaps they had the most questions about who Jesus is? Perhaps they wrestled with what Jesus was teaching them, what they saw and heard. There is nothing like an experience with the Holy to pin our doubt to the wrestling mat. And that is what Jesus offered them—an experience with the Holy. They saw their teacher transformed. There was this bright glow all about him. He was brighter than any white they have ever seen. These three disciples were witnessing a bridge between heaven and earth. Jesus became that bridge where the Holy connects with humanity. In addition, they saw their revered biblical heroes, Elijah and Moses, glowing as well. And they heard the voice of God affirming Jesus as God’s Son. If there was any doubt in their minds as to who Jesus is, this mountaintop experience pinned that doubt to the wrestling mat.

In the sermon series we discussed that doubt is like having two minds. We believe yet we doubt. We question things that happen in life because we don’t understand. We are challenged with new experiences and/or crises at every stage of life. We doubt God when we experience the complexities of life, evil within and in the world, when we are lost or broken, when God seems distant, and when we can’t face God because of our guilt. Yet doubt is the first step to faith. We also discussed how our faith can keep us from slipping too far into doubt. I love the question that Elijah asks Elisha. “What do you want me to do for you before I’m taken away from you?” Did you

hear Elisha's answer? "Let me have twice your spirit." I can relate to that. When I am slipping into doubt, when life knocks me down, I want twice the spirit, twice the faith. No, I need twice the faith. Have you ever known someone who has that kind of faith when adversity hits? No matter what tragedy happens, they do more than keep the faith, they proclaim the glory of God in the moment and then go out and begin to work so the glory of God is seen by others. Yes, give me twice your spirit!

So how does one get twice the spirit? Well, we need to climb to the mountain top. We need to create methods to connect with the Holy. For Jesus, it was to take time away from the crowds to pray. Our relationship with God is like a long distance relationship. What forms of communication do we use to keep our relationship strong? John Wesley suggested a few. He called them "attending upon all the ordinances of God." He lists them as "the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, fasting or abstinence." He believed that those who attended to these ordinances of God would then go out into the world to do good and not to do harm. Attending to these ordinances bridges the long distance gap. It's almost like being there. Attending to these ordinances is like keeping in touch. They keep the relationship strong.

Let's look at these individually. First, the public worship of God. Attending worship is like going to the mountaintop and then coming down to earth again to serve. Our worship is designed in this manner. We begin our worship services by singing praises to God and giving thanks to God. Then we read God's Word and hear it explained. We respond to God's Word in a variety of ways through confession, renewing our baptismal vows, baptism, partaking in the Lord's Supper, sharing and praying our concerns, and offering our gifts to God as a way of thanking God for being God. Then we are sent out to serve through a song, a blessing, and a charge. As part of our worship we interact with each other before and after the actual worship service as building relationships. This, too, is an important part of the mountain top. A different part of worship might be that special moment that connects someone with the Holy. It could be the music, the scripture, the children's sermon, the preaching, the praying, a hug, and/or all of it. The important part of worship for Wesley is that we do it together, because God's presence is often made known to us through each other. Second, the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. Wesley expected the early Methodists to be reading the word every day. He did for an hour every morning! Expounded means explained. That could be through a sermon, reading someone's thoughts on a particular scripture, or writing down one's own thoughts about it. Third, the Supper of the Lord which is Communion or the Lord's Table. For Wesley, this was a very special moment to connect with the Holy. The bread and wine for him was a means of God's grace, a tangible expression of God's love. Some of my most power experiences with God have been both in receiving communion and giving communion. Fourth, searching the Scriptures. When one has a question, when one begins to doubt, when a crisis occurs, Wesley believed the first place we should turn to is the Bible. There are words in here that give us strength to stand up against whatever life may bring us. And fifth, fasting or abstinence. Traditionally people have fasted from eating rich foods six days of the week during Lent and feasted on Sundays. That's why Sundays are not counted as part of the forty days of Lent. And why Shrove Tuesday is celebrated. People prepared meals that were rich in fat before Lent began. Then a tradition began that we "gave something up for Lent." And now, there is a tradition that we give something up that we don't like such as liver or brussels sprouts! But fasting or abstinence can also be abstaining from whatever draws our focus away from being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. And that is different for each of us.

Several of you told me that you want to be more intentional in doing some of these and thought Lent would be a great time to start again. So we are offering a book study on a book called, *A World Worth Saving: Lenten Spiritual Practices For Action*. It touches on these ordinances of God and how God calls us down from the mountain into the world to serve. We have set up two different times for your convenience to discuss the book: a morning time for those of you who prefer a time during the day (Wed. 10 am) and an evening class for those who can't make it during the day (Tues. 7:15 pm). Both will begin in March.

If you can't make either of the classes, but want to read the book as part of your Lenten discipline, we can supply you with the book, too. The sign up list is on the table and another one on the bulletin board.

On this Valentine's weekend when we focus on love, we are reminded that we love because God first loved us (I John 4:9). How do you connect with Jesus the one who loves you so much he gave his very life for you? How are you being transformed so God's light glows around you?

Resources: *The United Methodist Discipline 2008*; *A World Worth Saving: Lenten Spiritual Practices For Action* by George Hovaness Donigian