

On Peppermint Ice Cream

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Luke 9:28 to 43

28Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. 34While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” 36When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” 41Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 42While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Some times on the journey of faith you just have to have a party. Jesus in a lot of ways was a partying kind of guy. So much of his ministry took place at parties, meals and gatherings.

For instance, his spiritual essence was revealed when he turned water into wine at the Wedding of Cana. Jesus participated in these meals where he invited tax collectors and sinners, the poor and the out cast to dine with him while some grumbled about it. He spoke of God's abundance when a boy offered five fish and two loaves bread and he fed 5000. For the Catholics among us it was like the ultimate Friday fish fry where all could participate and there was more than enough. Very Fun.

So now this morning we find the disciples with Jesus up on the top of the biblical equivalent of Jay Peak. There was something brilliant, joyful and out of the ordinary which took

place up there on the mountain. On the mountain, Jesus lit up like he was surrounded with disco lights. Remember those happening disco parties in the seventies with the B Gees. Disco! He dazzled in such a way that one might have thought he was covered in fresh snow sparkling in the sun light.

The disciples also saw two special guests at the party Elijah, the prophet, and Moses. These were two seminal figures from the Jewish past that made Jesus cool, credible and helped everyone understand that he was rolling with the right crowd. It was a star studded moment. The Transfiguration offered a break from the gritty, humdrum and not so glamorous life that can sometimes come with ministry and discipleship. In many ways, the Transfiguration was a foretaste of the resurrection. The Transfiguration offered much needed joy and hope for the Lenten journey. A Mardi Gras celebration filled with joy and color before the imposition of the cross with grey ashes.

I think Christians struggle with the Transfiguration. In this country, for so many years we had blue laws where you could not go out to the movies on Sunday, the resurrection day. We might have stayed home to play a board game but certainly not cards. The church can at times have a particularly hard time with it. When my mother was newly married they moved to Tacoma, Washington where they decided to join a Presbyterian Church in town. As tradition would have it, my mother, as a young eager idea filled new member, decided to join the women's fellowship. It was a tradition that the fellowship put on a lunch for the women every month or so. Eventually, my mother had her turn to prepare the meal. After sitting through her fill of skimpy servings of chili mac, iceberg lettuce salads and Jell-O with cool whip month after month, she decided to make crab soufflé and a better tasting salad. She topped the whole thing off with a fabulous dessert of peppermint ice cream with rich chocolate brownies and covered in chocolate sauce.

The meal was seemingly a real hit. It was a bright spot amidst the occasional dreariness that went with being a housewife in the early 60s. But, after the meal was over, there was quite a buzz in church among some women who were very upset about this extravagant meal which my mother had prepared. As the phone lines burned up, some women complained that this meal was an unwelcome contribution. I mean, how would anyone else live up to such a meal there after? It is just a little too much fun to have in church. Peppermint ice cream and crab soufflé was just not in keeping with stingy meal standards of the women's fellowship. Instead of enjoying the meal on its own terms the women's fellowship might have thought it better to have a by-law change so this meal would not happen again.

I am not sure after this church kerfuffle that my mother was very high on the women's fellowship. She swore she would never prepare a meal for them again. The whole crab soufflé peppermint ice cream brownie thing was just too much of a party that had no place in that Presbyterian church or for that matter in all of Christendom. Christianity was about ashes and not sugar.

Now some people might say that turning the morning sermon into another episode on the Food Channel may seem a little frivolous. But playfulness, color, light and art pointing to life is

really in my mind a serious Christian business. So often we get stuck in these ruts where our vision is contracted. We get caught up in these well traveled patterns of living and thinking which make it hard to imagine that there is another way to approach life. Families, churches, and whole countries get sort of stuck in these endless conflicts which have no end. We can get stuck in these well traveled and intractable ways of thinking which prevent us from imagining new possibilities. New people with a good idea just give up.

In 2006, I went to South Africa to study the relationship between playfulness and racial reconciliation. One of the things I learned was how music, art, and joy filled gathering instilled in South Africans a lightness of being which was so necessary as a way to counteract the oppressive acts of apartheid. To pay attention to art and aesthetics and the joy of community, was a way for those who were oppressed to say that the ugliness and the grimness, the stinginess, the violence of apartheid which denied fresh food, decent shelter, education and gainful employment for many South Africans, would never have the last word in their lives.

One of the evils of Apartheid was the use Christian language and the Bible as a way to oppress others. The Resurrection, the Transfiguration countered that oppression so as to say that death in all of its forms would not have the last word. Today, you can go around the country to find these pictures of color, joy, life, culture, and music. Many times this extravagance is created from simple objects. Plastic garbage bags from lands fills are transformed into decorative animals. Left over telephone wire is used to create beautiful baskets. Bottle caps are made into a colorful napkin holder. Fun. For those who heard Ladysmith Black Mambaza at the Flynn Center last week, they made beautiful music without instruments or sheet music. It's all done from ear and listening to one another. I can remember going to churches where the only instrument was a plastic PVC pipe used for a horn or where people slapped the back of Bibles in lieu of the use of drums.

The African theologian, John De Gruchy, would say that Apartheid in South Africa oppression was related to ugliness. Aesthetic beauty became a means to bring life and hope and promise to those who deal with grimness and ugliness as it is experienced in a physical, political, or spiritual way. So for Christians, we so desperately need the Transfiguration which offers much brilliance in the darkness of our existence.

The story in the Transfiguration was not all sweetness and light. The story culminates when the clouds opened and God reached down and called Jesus his beloved son. It says that the disciples, who were in a party mood, were rather terrified. It was at this moment that the party cleared away, the lights dissipated, Moses and Elijah went home for the night, and the disciples were all alone with Jesus. They proceeded to not tell anyone what they had seen. Why the long faces? Why the silence. Why the secrecy? I think it could be, perhaps, that disciples realized that if they shared the essence of Jesus, his joy, and his power, that some people might not understand and it could be quite threatening.

Remember that after they came down the mountain, they went out to carry on Jesus' healing ministry. They came upon a boy who had a bad spirit in him and was convulsing. They tried to heal the boy but they did not succeed. It might have been that they were too scared or did

not know what to do. Maybe they felt some political pressure and did not get too close. At any rate, Jesus was a little rough on those disciples for their failure and healed the boy himself. It might have been Jesus felt that the disciples were doing their job in a timid and half hearted way. But whatever was going on, the disciples learned that offering good news was difficult.

I think my mom realized the problem with Gospel centered joy at the women's fellowship. With her ministry of crab soufflé and peppermint ice cream she started a little fire storm of church gossip and intrigue which became very unnerving. I can also tell you for sure that the inclusive democratic and joy filled vision of those who sought to break the shackles of Apartheid were powerfully resisted. Those who held up that inclusive vision were jailed and crushed for so many years. The Transfiguration and Resurrection rocked the world and it was more than the world could handle. Any one who might offer a joy filled picture of the Gospel which ran contrary to the South African government's vision of racial separation would be summarily eliminated if possible. And, of course, the disciples had some understandable trepidation because the joy filled, God intoxicated and playful power of Jesus was going to run up against the religious and political establishment of the time and was shaking things up.

Today we are so blessed to have Sheila, Danielle, Cynthia and Bob covenant with us to walk the Jesus walk. When you are new you bring to our common life new ideas and energy. So often new folks might not be accustomed to the way we do things around here. I am new myself and might figure it out in the next ten years or so. But what a new perspective brings is an opportunity for us to pause to think seriously about the depth of commitment to serve others in Christ's name. My father-in-law, who was a distinguished and principled man of faith, was often fond of telling others that if you do the work of Christ you must give this work nothing less than your best. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. according to Vincent Harding who said that in the struggle of discipleship we must worry about three things: Courage, compassion and creativity. Like the disciples, my mother, people in South Africa, King, my father in-law and so many others in this congregation and over the centuries learned sometimes when we do our best we might run into a little resistance.

Discipleship can get dicey and complicated. But here is my advice. Keep faithful. Keep working for justice. Keep on loving well. Let joy, art, wonder and beauty into your life and share it with others. And by all means keep serving that peppermint ice cream!