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Called to be the Church  
Martin Grove United Church  
March 3, 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-43

Today is known as “Transfiguration Sunday”, which is why we just heard the reading about Jesus transfiguring in front of his friends. Today is also our annual meeting after this service - and after lunch of course. I wonder if there is any connection between the transfiguration and our annual meeting. Well, let’s find out. But you know me well enough to know that yes, I will suggest there is a connection.

But to begin - what does “transfigure” mean anyway? “Trans” means change. And “figure” refers to either the nature, or the appearance, of something. So, “transfigure” means a change in the nature - or the appearance - of something. The gospel story is therefore either about the disciples seeing Jesus’s appearance change, or the disciples seeing Jesus actually change, or it is about how the disciples changed how they viewed Jesus. In any case, something changed.

So now I’ve said it - the “C” word - “change”. Yuck. I mean, who ever wants to talk about change in church. And yet, change is all around us. Even in our Exodus reading we see change. Remember that in the Exodus myth, Moses goes up a mountain and comes back with stone tablets containing the 10 commandments. But when he returns, the people Moses left behind are having a party. And so in anger, Moses smashes the tablets because the people broke a commandment they had not been told about yet. So later on in the story, Moses goes back up the mountain to get new tablets to replace the ones that he smashed. But his new tablets are a completely different set of 10 commandments. Instead of reasonable commandments to not kill or steal, we have very strange commandments including a prohibition on boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. Even the “10 commandments” represent change.

Change is the only thing that is permanent in life. Have you ever noticed that? Sometime during my lifetime - I’m not exactly sure when - nobody asked my permission - toilet paper became bathroom tissue. Sneakers became running shoes. False teeth

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became dental appliances. The dump became the landfill. Used cars became previously-owned transportation. And as we were reminded of this week, governments no longer lie to people, they engage in dis-information. Change is all around us.

For the transfiguration of Jesus, the traditional view has been that Jesus changed during his mountain-top experience. The “proof” for that is that the lectionary authors paired the gospel reading today with the reading from Exodus where Moses visibly changed after meeting God. But it’s still a little hard to figure out exactly what changed. In the gospel story, God - referring to Jesus - says, “This is my son - listen to him”, which is almost exactly what God’s said 3 years earlier at Jesus’s baptism. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus - when we actually read it - does not describe change it all, it really just lays out the status quo. It lays out a vision that Jesus was fairly consistent in his mission during his public ministry. So where is the change? Where is the “trans”? What is the point of the story if Jesus didn’t change? Remind me - why do we care about this transfiguration business?

In Luke’s version of the transfiguration, it says that the disciples saw the appearance of Jesus’s face change, and Jesus’s clothes appeared to be very white. So perhaps that’s all there is to the story. To imagine that the appearance of Jesus changed, while his mission remained what it had always been. Is it just me, or does that sound just a bit ... pointless ... I mean, if that’s all that happened, why would anyone get excited about Transfiguration Sunday? Perhaps the highlight of our day will be the lunch we share together.

Can we even imagine that the appearance of Jesus changed while his mission remained the same. Have you ever seen such a thing yourself. Well, I think it’s actually a pretty good description of the church today.

We see that on a national level within the United Church of Canada. As I’m sure you know, on Jan 1 of this year, the United Church made the biggest structural reorganization since its founding in 1925. We now live in a 3 court system instead of a 4 court system. The change represents six years of intense focus on the structure and governance of the church. And this week, in a letter written by the moderator and the general secretary of the UCC, they invited us into our future, saying, “It is important as

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we gather as communities of faith for annual meetings and as our regional councils come together that we now get on with the things that these changes were meant to allow us to better do: deepen our faith and theological convictions and put our faith into action in the world.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, our structure ... our appearance ... has changed while our mission has remained the same. In fact, our appearance had to change in order to better enable us to do our mission. Part of the reason for the restructuring was to find ways to put less of our energy into governance, allowing us to therefore put more of our energy into our mission. Nationally, our appearance has changed. Our mission remains the same. Just like with the transfiguration of Jesus.

I think the same process is even happening in local churches. Even here at Martin Grove United Church. In many ways, our appearance has changed.

*[ask: are we visibly changing here?]*

We don't look like we used to. Today, you have a minister who doesn't wear robes, and who is allergic to wearing a tie and to touching paper. We regularly have hand-drums and guitars during service. We have music written less than 50 years ago. We have people that sometimes come in the door in blue jeans bringing a cup of coffee with them. We have people who check their phones during the service. None of those things would have happened - or would have been acceptable - 10 years ago. But today, those things are just normal. And that's all fine with me. Because it really doesn't matter if our appearance changes. What matter is that we are still committed to the mission of being a church here in Rexdale.

On the subject of coffee in church, I have to say I was disappointed recently because someone came to church with their cup of coffee, and one of our members attacked them and told them they were being disrespectful. My disappointment was not that a person dared to walk in our doors with coffee of course. My disappointment was that we did not welcome the person with open arms. Surely in this congregation we want to embrace anyone that God sends through our front door, right?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.united-church.ca/news/open-letter-moderator-and-general-secretary>

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And I want to apologize right now for my part in that. Because I have failed to teach you something. And I want to fix that right now. What does the word “sanctuary” mean to you? I will assume most of you think it refers to the space we are now sitting in. Well sorry, but the meaning of the word sanctuary is something else that has changed. And yes you are out of date, because it changed about 2000 years ago.

In the Old Testament, “sanctuary” referred to a place where God supposedly lived. Reading from Hebrews 9, “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lamp-stand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies.” (Hebrews 9:1-4). The holy of holies was where God was thought to live. And the curtain separated the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary. But when that trouble-maker - Jesus - came along, he changed that. You may remember that when Jesus was crucified, at the moment he died the curtain in the temple split open, signifying that we are no longer separated from God - ever. Christians do not believe that God lives in a building - hiding behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz. God lives within the body of Christ. And the body of Christ is - us. So we - the congregation - are the sanctuary, in Old Testament terms. We are the flesh and bones, energy, the hopes, the fears and the passions of Jesus. We are the sanctuary.

Not only is this room not a sanctuary, but the whole building is not a church either. The building we are sitting in is not a church. This building is just is a building we use to help us become a church. This is just a building we use so that we ourselves can become a church. I invite you to keep that in mind when God sends people through our front door.

In the words of blogger ThoughtRiver, “I absolutely love coffee in church. we have starbucks at my church and it keeps everyone pepped up and attentive. and, if you prefer, we also have lemonade, tea, and water. good times. I remember back in the day at my old church they would stop you at the door if you had a beverage. times, they are a changing... and I love it.” That quote is from 10 years ago, but the way.

But again, why should it bother us if our appearance changes, as long as our

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commitment to our mission remains? Do we care about our appearance? Or do we only care that we live, breath, and act as a church in our community. Like with the transfiguration of Jesus, who cares about our appearance as long as we maintain our mission to this community. And at our Annual Meeting we are all invited to decide if what we talk about concerns our mission, or merely our appearance. Let's hope we talk about our mission. What's that old joke? Going to church doesn't make you a christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.

There is no question that this church is struggling somewhat to re-affirm our own mission. We are a work in progress. And that's ok. We are not called to be perfect. We are only called to be the church in our own time and place.

I really hope that everyone here - including any visitors - joins us for our Annual Meeting and that we come as the church in progress. Come to the AGM and bring your energy and your excitement. We are the flesh and bones, energy, the hopes, the fears, the passions, of Jesus. We are Martin Grove United Church. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*