



“Seeing the Invisible”

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Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSV)*

True confessions: After a dozen years in higher education and twenty-five years of parish ministry, I finally understand what the Transfiguration is all about. It’s not that I couldn’t have told you before in a scholarly way (using historical and literary criticism) what the Transfiguration was about. I could have done that before. In fact, I have done that many times over the past eight years that I’ve been at Eden, and the previous fifteen plus years that I’ve served at other churches.

Many times, I’ve explained that the Transfiguration is a peculiar story in the synoptic gospels which primarily telegraphs to Jesus’ followers that he is as significant—or more significant—than Moses and Elijah, two of the most influential prophets in the history of Israel.

Despite the importance of this historical and theological distinction in the transfiguration narrative, though, there’s a kind of spiritual experience going on in these accounts that is not fully captured by academic descriptions of the occasion. Transfiguration is more than a theological concept or an historical event; it is and was a profound spiritual transformation that words cannot fully capture.

The difference between then and now is that now I can do more than tell you what the Transfiguration is about. Now I can show you.

In a sentence, here’s what I have come to believe the Transfiguration is about: it is about seeing what others do not see, and it is about undergoing a metamorphosis as a result of that experience.

“Metamorphosis” is the closest simile that biblical scholars offer for the word “transfigure.” Metamorphosis means to be changed from one type of being into another. Think of the process that a Monarch butterfly goes through as she grows from egg, to larva (the caterpillar stage), to pupa (the chrysalis phase), and finally to an adult.

Most discussions of the Transfiguration focus on how Jesus was changed, and how Jesus' transfiguration changed the disciples' understanding of who he was and what his ministry was about. Today, by contrast, though, I'm going to focus on how we—like the disciples—can be changed by what we see and understand, and how transfiguration can happen for us.

Again, transfiguration is about seeing what others do not see, and about undergoing a metamorphosis as a result of that experience. Allow me to show you what I mean.

II

The Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, Executive Director of CLUE-CA (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice of California) tells this story about two men she knows who serve as janitors at a large city hospital in southern California. Their names are Raul and Jose. The story goes like this:

Raul's and Jose's jobs are to mop and wax the hospital hallways. They do this every night, five nights a week, in the middle of the night, in order to minimize the risk of people slipping and falling on the wet-mopped floor.

Each night, Raul and Jose fill their commercial mop buckets with disinfectant soap and hot water. They set out their caution signs, and they mop and buff every hallway in the hospital.

One night, not so long ago, after the men had completed mopping yet another hallway, a group of people came out of the elevator and walked right past them and their bright yellow "Slippery when wet!" signs.

Raul, said to Jose, "Hey man, I just figured something out."

"What's that?" Jose asked.

"I just figured out that we are very powerful people," said Raul.

"How's that?" asked Jose.

"We have the power to be invisible. We are invisible to all those people who just walked out of the elevator. They didn't see us at all. They didn't see our signs. They didn't see the wet floor. They didn't see all the work that went into making this floor clean. They just walked right past us, and right over our clean floor."

Alexia's story isn't unique. Countless stories unfold around us like this one every day. And these stories continue to unfold because most of us are subtly trained not to notice immigrants or the often low-wage work that they perform so that the majority of our society can enjoy a better life.

Not to notice—not to see—is normal. That’s what we learn through a thousand little implicit messages every day. When we don’t notice—when we don’t see—the status quo is maintained. We are not transfigured—we are not changed—the world stays pretty much the same.

But what if we do notice?

What if we see what others do not see? What if we look the Rauls and Joses of the world in the eyes, and see them for who they really are: fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons who are working two and three jobs in order to put food on the table for their families?

What if we look them in the eyes and see them as our friends and neighbors?

What if we make the connections between their stories and our stories? What if we see how we and others benefit from the low-wage, back-breaking work that the Rauls and Joses of the world regularly perform? What if we see how those who benefit from their labor often dare to look down on them, literally and figuratively? And, what if we challenge those attitudes, and the policies and practices on which they are based?

What if we noticed? What if we saw what others do not see? What if we made the connections?

If we did, I think we would be transfigured. Here’s how.

III

One hundred eight years ago this week, a man named Johannes Thomsen, and his widowed sister, Johanna, and her four children, arrived at Ellis Island on the U.S.S. Pennsylvania. They didn’t have visas. They didn’t need any. At the time that my great-grandfather and his sister immigrated to the U.S., our nation held its arms wide open to all immigrants who came to our borders—all except the Chinese and Japanese.

Today we would call my ancestors “economic migrants.” They had just enough money in their pockets to pay their passage to the U.S. and to purchase train tickets to the Midwest, where they had heard it was possible to buy good farmland and to have a more abundant life than back home.

Soon after they were processed through U.S. immigration services on Ellis Island, my mother’s grandfather and great aunt and cousins boarded a transcontinental train that followed a path parallel to what we know today as Interstate 80. Johannes and Johanna and her children disembarked at a small town in central Iowa called Lincoln. The population today is similar to what it was then—under 100. There were and are no street lights, no post office, and no schools.

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My ancestors were dairy and cabbage farmers and fisher people from Schleswig-Holstein. They farmed the dikes and fished along the northwest coast of Germany, along the North Sea. They had hoped to continue farming in Iowa, but lacked the capital needed to purchase land when they first arrived. So my great-grandfather went to work on other people's farms in Central Iowa, and when there was no work in Iowa, he left his sister and her children behind, and migrated to Nebraska and back, following the crops and the change of seasons, and working for room and board and the little pocket money that he saved.

Just before the harsh winters set in, my Johannes returned to Lincoln, Iowa and eventually to Germany, where he collected his bride-to-be, Emma Löhde, and two of his oldest sister's children, who had been placed in a Hamburg orphanage after their parents died. Johannes was 29 and Emma was 27 at the time they immigrated to the U.S. with his niece and nephew.

Neither Johannes nor Emma had the benefit of much formal education, but they knew how to farm, and they had a strong work ethic. After my great-grandparents arrived in the U.S., they worked another year to save enough money to get married and to rent a small farm. Over the years they "traded up" in terms of the quality of land that they rented, until eventually they earned enough money to purchase a small farm of their own.

Johannes and Emma sent their three children (Alfred, Hattie, and Margaret) to country school where they each received an eighth grade education and attended some high school in Reinbeck. All three continued in the family farming business, and eventually married, rented and bought small farms of their own, much like their ancestors before them.

While the Thomsen children were still at home, my great-grandmother, Emma, developed a respiratory ailment that was later diagnosed as tuberculosis (TB). She lived with TB another seven years. For a time, she was confined to a TB sanitarium in Oakdale, Iowa, and was brought home for the last two years of her life, where she was cared for by her husband. After Emma died, a hired girl from a Bohemian farming family down the road came to work for the Thomsen family. Her name was Mary Chesik. After a few months, my grandfather asked her to marry him, and from then on, my Grandma Thomsen said that she did the same work for the Thomsen family that she always had, except for no pay.

Like Raul and Jose and their wives, my great-grandparents were immigrants to the United States. They arrived in the U.S. as young adults. They were raised on farms in their nations of origin. They came to this country hoping to escape the economic privations and poor health conditions in their homelands. They were all what we refer to today as "economic migrants."

What's the difference between Raul and Jose and their families, and Johannes and Johanna, and Emma and their families, you may ask?

Not much, in my view. Not much in terms of the circumstances that brought them to this country, and what it took for them to survive here.

What is different, though, is how the stories of early twentieth-century immigrants are framed today relative to the way that the stories of contemporary immigrants are framed in the dominant culture.

Where I come from, everybody knows that Johannes and Emma Thomsen were my maternal great-grandparents on my mother's father's side, and that their only son, Alfred Thomsen married my grandmother, Mary Chesik, the hired girl who worked for them after his mother died. Back home, my great-grandparents and grandparents and their peers are seen and talked about as heroes and heroines, whose courage, strength and grit we admire and hope to emulate.

But regrettably, too few back home and elsewhere in this country know the stories of Raul and Jose and their families—who have lived very similar lives to my ancestors—and so too few see the similarities between their experiences. So the Rauls and the Joses and their families are not as likely to be seen as heroes and heroines whose courage, strength and grit we admire and hope to emulate.

Too many fail to see the Rauls and Joses and their families, so they do not know their stories. And as a consequence, too many believe that modern immigrants are a threat to and a drain on the economy and society to which they regularly contribute, by paying taxes and by doing the work that others will not do and that sustains our nation's way of life.

IV

More and more, I wonder what would happen if the Rauls and the Joses were no longer invisible to even twenty percent more of the voters and legislators in our nation. More and more, I wonder what would happen if those of us whose families have lived in this country more than one generation saw the similarities between our ancestors' stories and the stories of modern immigrants. More and more, I wonder what would happen if we all connected the dots between the immigrants who mop the floors in our hospitals, pick the fruits and vegetables that we put on our dinner tables, and make the beds and clean the rooms in the hotels that we frequent.

More and more, I wonder what would happen if we saw those who are presently invisible to us; if we heard the stories of those we do not see in the stories of our ancestors; and if we connected all the dots.

More and more, I wonder, but then I stop wondering and I know. I know that we would be transfigured. I know that we would be transfigured like Matthew was transfigured when he saw how Jesus' story related to the stories of Moses and Elijah, and how he connected the dots between the ancient prophets' words and Jesus' concern for the

aliens and poor in his midst, and how Jesus reached out to fulfill the prophets' commands by welcoming the strangers and aliens in our midst, and by feeding those who were hungry, clothing those who were naked, and housing those who were homeless.

This is what the Transfiguration is all about. It is about seeing what others do not see. It is about making the connections—as Matthew did—between Jesus' identity and message and the identity and messages of the ancient prophets. It is about hearing the immigration stories of our ancestors in the stories of modern immigrants, so that we and our nation might be transfigured, and so that the immigration policies and practices in our nation might be transformed. Amen.