

To De or Re Mythologize?

Transfiguration Sun., c, Feb. 14, 2010

Luke 9:28-36

Last week after church Maly Lu led a fascinating workshop on how it is that our faith develops through our lifetimes. Her teaching focused on the research done by Dr. James Fowler that has been the core of faith development studies for 35 years or more. That afternoon Maly Lu gave us a brief overview about how people of faith tend to develop through the years: the patterns that we follow, the crises that we face, and some of the resources that we will find helpful on that journey of faith.

This morning let us take our Scripture from the gospel of Luke about the Transfiguration of Jesus and follow through how adults at different Stages of faith development will understand what the story means. Now, there are pitfalls for us to avoid in this process. The first is to avoid judging ourselves or other people as inferior because we haven't moved towards some higher level of faith development. With regard to our faith development we are where we are and there should be no moral judgment about that.

The second point is that we are going to jump in midstream. Other than to say that children and some youth would accept the story of Jesus' transfiguration; his luminescence; and the appearance of Moses and Elijah from vastly different epochs in stride... we are not even going to discuss how it is that children & youth their spiritual blessing in it.

Nor are we going to look at those of the highest levels of faith development would perceive. My hope is that we will focus on the real perceptions and meanings experienced by almost all of us adults in the sanctuary this morning.

My third point is that we could only scratch the surface this morning. If you find this interesting or important, you will find it helpful to follow some of the easily available resources listed on our church website as footnotes to this sermon on Tuesday.

Stage 3

So let us begin in the 3rd Stage of faith development, one often called conventional faith, a pre-critical faith. It is often the way we find ourselves as we enter adulthood. One of the hallmarks of this Stage is that people in it tend to image God through interpersonal relationships such as seeing God as a loving parent, a friend, or beloved. The common religious hunger of adolescence is to find a God who knows and loves me deeply, and this yearning is met in Stage 3 faith. As you might expect when judgments are called for one's own reason is subjugated to a divine authority that is "out there." Knowledge about what God desires or demands' comes through religious authority figures, rules about how to live a proper Christian faith, and the commonly held beliefs of one's religious fellowship.

Many, many people of faith reside in this Stage of faith development for their entire adult lives. And I suggest, that if we look carefully at the way many churches operate, we will see there a consistent pattern to help people continue to reside in this type of faith, by branding any of the next movements as unfaithfulness. By the way, our congregation is clearly not one of these churches.

If we take a look at the story of Jesus Transfiguration from a Stage 3 vantage point, it so inspirational! The appearance of Moses- as the great provider of the Law and Elijah- as the prophetic interpreter of the spirit of God- affirm Jesus as God great blessing. The voice of God coming out of the cloud "this is my son, my chosen; listen to him!" affirms Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Just so uplifting!

But for some, both the miraculous changing of Jesus' appearance and the words coming from the cloud become more than inspirational. They are also problematic. Some people aren't any longer at ease with this counter-rational description.

The transition out of this conventional, this pre-critical, faith typically begins with some personal experience that shatters the individuals *trust* in their church, or their religious

leadership, or their entire faith perspective, Some contradiction arises which so grates at the soul that it can no longer be swept under the rug. An intense self-reflection sets in in which this person examines why she believes what she believes or thinks what she thinks. This questioning undercuts the security that someone in Stage 3 has previously experienced. And as painful as this is, this irritation becomes the vehicle for the next Stage of faith development.

Stage 4

Some people make this transition to Stage 4, critical faith, while still teens, though many would never enter it until their 30s, or 40s if ever. Stage 4 is often a grueling time often of deep personal distress as the breakdown of the solid and comforting world of Stage 3 forces them elsewhere. Some will briefly find another Stage 3 theology or religion and find new comfort there, but much more typically the individual takes a radical departure from dependence on the external authority of other spiritual leaders and moves to the developing of their own inner authority, by discerning what seems true and right -- not by an outward standard, but by an inward sense.

This is such a disturbing time, a great many people leave behind forever their religious faith.

If one is going to maintain one's religious faith in this phase, a radical demythologizing of faith is the painfully necessary next step. One can no longer rely on a simple straightforward meaning of biblical stories and teachings. Everything has to be re-examined, the irrational, the immoral, the unscientific is all addressed with the full force of one's attention, to find if there is some valuable meaning hidden in the story. If not, to maintain one's integrity, it must be jettisoned. It is Thomas Jefferson taking a knife and cutting out the phrases and stories of the New Testament that he determined not authoritative.

I have here the central work of the main theological proponent of demythologizing, Dr. Rudolf Bultmann's monumental *Theology of the New Testament* where he works his way through the entire New Testament doing exactly this. In it Dr. Bultmann traces this morning's

Transfiguration story back to very early Christian tradition. Through considerable rational argumentation, and study Dr. Bultmann concludes:

- that Jesus did not understand us to understand himself as a unique son of God, substantially different from the rest of us.
- Further, he argues that only after the early Christian communities' claim of Jesus resurrection did this Transfiguration story come to be used as a way of affirming Jesus' divine status, and, finally,
- that trinitarian understanding would have been flatly rejected by the historical Jesus himself.

If one was comfortably ensconced in Stage 3 faith development and one began to seriously engage with what Dr. Bultmann says in this book, you are forced to either:

- do some very serious mental contortions, comparable to describing how the universe revolves around the earth, to maintain one's old faith - or
- to demythologize, along w/Bultmann, strip away the literal, the distracting, the scientifically problematic chaff (as Bultmann does) to discern the deeper meaning there that is at the same time faithful, and also consistent with what else one believes and trusts.

Stage 4 is a painful time and it can last a very long time-- especially if one tries to had hide from the inevitable face-to-face encounter with the challenge. The call to us, like Jacob wrestling with the angel through the dark of the night by the River Jabbock, is to throw ourselves into the match with everything we've got....and then to hang on until we receive the blessing at the morning light. And I'm saying "we" because I believe that a great many here in this Sanctuary are living through the trials of this very dynamic in stage 4, Critical faith.

But the hidden gift of Stage 4 is the beginning of the recognition that life-and so religious faith- are vastly more complex, richer, more subtle, and far transcend the narrow limits of the reason-jacketed mind. These are the seeds of hope that develop into the new life

experienced in Stage 5.

Stage 5

Dr. Fowler says that people usually enter Stage 5, post-critical, around age 35 or 40 though it can happen much earlier or a much later or never. An essential difference between Stage 4 and Stage 5 is that in Stage 4 the recognition that we might never realize the absolute answers we hunger for produces despair. In Stage 5 we come to trust and to rest in face of life's mystery and no longer need a thoroughly rational understanding. In Stage 5 there is a new ability to coexist with and even enjoy paradox and transcendence and mystery.

That intimacy with God that was lost in Stage 4 and prefigured in Stage 3 is renewed and taken to new, previously unimaginable heights. For someone in Stage 5 faith all the talk we've heard of in the church about the oneness of humanity and the oneness of all creation is no longer just an idea, but it is experienced firsthand in moments as an at-one-ment with all that is and with God the Ground of all Being.

The old images and especially the Bible stories that were so problematic in Stage 4 come to take on a new and especially strong attraction and become treasured as they are reinterpreted symbolically and metaphorically. There's a new and profound acceptance of one's own self, and one's own abilities and inabilities, one's successes and failures.

For those not yet familiar with this new Stage, let me assure you that all of the struggle and pain of Stage 4 are not in vain. The hard work, the struggle for a meaningful faith is paid back in full with a new and satisfying faith experience. The central activity -- and it is not work in the sense of Stage 4-- the activity of Stage 5 is a re-sacralizing, a re-mythologizing the world around us. Biblical stories and biblical characters that were the source of problems in Stage 4 are reclaimed and redefined to express an inner world that is growing richly. God and God's activity are perceived everywhere we care to look deeply enough. There is an expansive new love for other people, other cultures and other religious traditions. There is a new openness to the natural world in celebration of it.

How would someone in Stage 5 faith understand the story of the Transfiguration?

First off, the problems perceived in Stage 4 would no longer be problems in the same way. Now...

- There would be a familiarity with the experience of Jesus face changing and his clothes becoming dazzling white, not in the exact same sense perhaps, but the Stage 5 faithful becomes comfortable with the mystical, and with perceptions changing radically; with the appearance of persons and scenes from the past and from tradition working their way sometimes through unconscious processes to awareness. Like Peter, the person in Stage 5 faith would say in face of such mystery, "master, it is good for us to be here " in the Presence and would yearn to set up camp there to enjoy it.

- Perhaps most revealing is that all of the difficulties experienced in Stage 4 around the question of whether or not Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah or a trinitarian Son of God- or whether this was read back into the story by the evangelists own belief- the Stage 5 faithful could take this simply as a challenge, a now especially urgent challenge, to be open and responsive to the present guidance of the Spirit of Jesus, which is now more & more often directly perceived...and which is incessantly calling us out into the world to serve others out of an ever deepening compassion.

This is not the end of the journey. Dr. Fowler goes on to describe in detail a further level, Stages 6 faithfulness, and in recent years has begun to believe that there are one or more Stages beyond that, but frankly, you and I are not likely to get there so we'll not deal with them today.

Friends, I do firmly believe that the movement from one type of faith to the next is a gift...but I also believe that our passion and our commitment and our honesty and our willingness to continue to return to God and ask for wisdom and guidance are key to our own ability to move forward along these paths.

Though we still have to work through the difficult times, this is a wonderful journey God

has set us on, and as we determine to help one another along it, we will be blessed in more ways than we can imagine.

Consider the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac. To a Stage 3 person, the clear moral response is to do what God calls one to do, regardless of how abhorrent this seems. This would be a good deciding issue between those in Stage 3 and V, with a keen wrestling in Stage 4.

SOURCES

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