

February 19, 2023
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Transfiguration, Year A
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Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

There is a lot going on in that reading from Matthew. I'm going to hone in on one piece of it. Matthew says that Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." Every year on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, which is also the last Sunday before Lent, we hear the about the transfiguration of Jesus, rotating between the story as told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Their three accounts differ in some details, but all specifically mention a change in Jesus' face and clothes. The shining of Jesus' face hearkens back to Moses: the book of Exodus says that, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after talking with God, "the skin of his face was shining."¹ But those "dazzling white" clothes are something new.

The fibers used to make fabric at the time of Jesus were off-white. Fabric would have been bleached most simply by laying it out in the sun. But bleaching was also enhanced with chemical aids, in the form of natural alkaline substances such as earth and ash. Not everyone could have afforded the time and resources necessary both to acquire such fabric and to maintain the clothes made from it. Because the rarefied is more highly valued, it makes sense that, in the Bible and elsewhere, white in general and white clothes in particular are associated with wealth, with purity, and with the supernatural. Wealth, with purity, and with the supernatural: in a sense, the attainment of "white" carries all these implications today, and we are urged to its pursuit: we hear about clothes whiteners and teeth whiteners and now even eye whiteners. Yes, we should all be clean and healthy, but sometimes it's hard to know where healthy hygiene ends and unhealthy obsession begins.

My first career was in chemical engineering. In my first job out of college I worked for a company that made, among other things, chemicals called "optical whiteners" or "optical brighteners." Optical brighteners are, for example, added to laundry detergent. When clothes are laundered, these microscopic fluorescent particles are left behind on the fabric, where there they reflect invisible ultraviolet light back as visible light. Thus optical brighteners make fabrics *appear* brighter and whiter, and therefore cleaner. But it's actually a sort of optical illusion, because the clothes aren't *really* any cleaner. In fact, though they *look* cleaner, they're arguably dirtier, because they're carrying a film of synthetic toxic chemicals.² This is merely one indication that we may have gone overboard in our obsession with white, but I can relate to that urge.

Both of my parents grew up poor during the depression. Both were taught that while they might not have fancy clothes, the clothes they did have could still be neat and clean. I think it was about self-respect, and also about trying very hard not to lose socio-economic ground. My parents passed all this on to me. As I grew into adulthood, it was still about self-respect, but it became about *improving* on the socio-economic gains my parents had made. It seems that, if my family is any indication, the attainment of white is part of maintaining or even advancing one's place in society. This isn't about holiness in a religious sense, but it surely is about a sort of societal sanctity. The person who doesn't attain white, literally and metaphorically, doesn't measure up. This implies that when it comes to race, there are some who can't ever measure up.

I used to live in Vermont. My first winter and spring there, enjoying the blessing of economic security, I seized the opportunity to realize a lifelong dream of working with horses. I took a job at a horse farm, where I spent a lot of time mucking stalls. I was 38 years old at the time, so it was very hard work, but I loved almost every minute of it. The thing is, it's easier to love hard work when you know it will be temporary. I worked there for six months. Besides being physically taxing, my job was very dirty. I wore my oldest, grubbiest clothes, which no amount of laundering completely cleaned. After work I looked and smelled like I had been mucking stalls all day. On the way home from work I sometimes stopped at the general store near the farm. At some point I began to suspect that I was treated differently there, a little less respectfully than in the places I went in my more usual guise.

My suspicions about this were confirmed one day as I mucked stalls at the farm. Most of the owners who boarded horses at the farm were wonderful people, and I made several friends among them. But there was one horse owner who treated the employees as if we were invisible. His wife was quite friendly, and so I knew some things about him—for example, that he was a physician. Several months into my time there, he had never spoken a word to me. Then one day he had a question, and I was the only person in the barn. After I gave him his answer, I could see him stop and really look at me for the first time. I looked into his eyes and I could see his brain spinning. Something about my response failed to fit with his previous assumptions about me. So he asked me a question, “What do you *do*?”

I was pretty sure I knew what he was getting at—that I couldn't possibly be *just* a farmworker. But I *was* “just a farmworker,” and, at least for a little while, quite happy to be one. And so I leaned on my muck rake, and I answered, “I work *here*.” He wasn't having that; “No,” he said, “what do you *really* do.” I didn't want to affirm his presumptions, but I didn't know what else to say, so I reluctantly replied that I had been a chemical engineer and technical writer. This information didn't make me any more or less worthy of his respect, but suddenly he wanted to talk. My esteem had risen in his mind, and I was no longer invisible.

For personal and social reasons, maybe it makes sense that, despite my own experiences, I *still* want my whites to be white. And maybe it also makes sense that, despite my own experiences, at times I catch *myself* uncharitably assessing others who are literally or metaphorically not so neat and clean. If I want my whites to be white, perhaps it is also inevitable that I negatively assess those whose whites tend toward gray. You'd think I would know better, and yet. Sometimes it's actually less about the status of the other person and more about that fear of losing ground myself. It is this very tension that companies tap into when they sell laundry detergent and teeth whiteners and eye whiteners, when they sell Botox injections and fad diets and just about everything else. Ultimately, they are selling a something that money can't buy.

Let's back up here and return to our Gospel reading. Matthew says, Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." We do mark today as Transfiguration Sunday. It's perhaps worth noting that the word *transfiguration* is not one we commonly use. In my mind it is attached to this singular religious event; I can think of no secular application.

While the use of a rarefied word like *transfiguration* helps to mark this event as special, but it might also serve to distance us from it. When I think about what a "transfigured" Jesus might look like or what that might mean, I tend to come up a little short. I find it helpful to return to the original text, in which Matthew uses a Greek word that is a variation on the word *metamorphosis*. And so, rather than say that Jesus was "transfigured," we might say that Jesus was "metamorphosed." Rather than call this "Transfiguration Sunday," we might call it "Metamorphosis Sunday." *Metamorphosis* is of course the word scientists use to describe the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The butterfly has long been a Christian symbol of the resurrection.

During the season of Epiphany, we remember the revealing of the human Jesus as the divine God. Jesus' metamorphosis on that mountaintop demonstrates the divine glory that complemented his fleshly clothes. You might say that Jesus was metamorphosed from caterpillar to butterfly and back again. But that's not right, really, because Jesus was always both caterpillar and butterfly. What the disciples got on that mountaintop was really the gift of true sight.

It seems to me that every person is like Jesus in being both butterfly and caterpillar. In other words, every human being carries the light of the divine. That's true whether their body appears neat or messy, clean or dirty. The challenge for us is to look at our neighbor and see not just a caterpillar, but also a butterfly. It's to look in the mirror and see not just a caterpillar, but also a butterfly.

As we seek and serve Christ in all persons, may the Holy Spirit continue to open our hearts, filling them with God's light. May that light bleach our *hearts* with purity and holiness and love.

Notes

¹ Exodus 34:29, NRSV.

² See, for example, "Do Seventh Generation laundry detergents contain optical brighteners?" on the Seventh Generation website, available at <https://help.seventhgeneration.com/hc/en-us/articles/217771608-Do-Seventh-Generation-laundry-detergents-contain-optical-brighteners-> (accessed February 19, 2023).