

“Let It Shine”

Luke 9:28-36

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Today's gospel is a traditional text for Transfiguration Sunday which is the last Sunday before Lent begins. Something happens to Jesus on the mountaintop, and he appears glorified, and God makes it clear to the disciples that especially now they are to listen to Jesus. God has chosen to let God's glory shine through Jesus Christ, and now Jesus is a reflection of God in the world. We as church are to do the same. We are to reflect God's glory, and to let it shine so that the beauty, the love, the harmony of God will be seen by all creation.

On May 12, 1912 forty-six people formed the interdenominational Union Church in San Dimas, California. The first services were held upstairs in the Hoke Building on Bonita Avenue. The name of the church, Union Church, was well suited to its members, who came from ten different denominations: Baptist, Catholic, Christian, Congregational, Episcopal, the Friends, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Universalist. In 1912 San Dimas was a small town fewer than 2,000 people, and it was home to a thriving citrus industry. The church grew and waned with the fortunes of the citrus crops. In 1917 this property was purchased for \$1,400 and a building began which was not to exceed \$10,000.

As San Dimas grew those ten distinct denominations that made up the Union Church ventured out to establish churches unique to their denominations, and this church retained membership in the Southern Conference of Congregational Churches. When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957, churches were given the opportunity to vote on membership and in 1960 we became a United Church of Christ. During the first years of our formation I'm quite sure that San Dimas Community Church let their light shine within this community and extending into the world. I don't know specific stories, but I bet some of you do, and I hope that as we move closer to our 100th anniversary about five years from now, you will help us document the ways in which God's light has shown forth from this place.

I know more stories about God's light shining through the United Church of Christ which this year celebrates its 50th Anniversary with the theme "Let It Shine." How four denominations became one is itself a shining, albeit daunting, moment in church history. It was 20 years in the making, and yet, it happened, not because they wanted a bigger denomination (in numbers) but because they wanted to be a more faithful witness to God's glory in the world. All four denominations had a common thread of having been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They didn't always keep in line with the traditional churches from which they came. And because they had known persecution and alienation, they were hard wired to stand up for groups of people who in subsequent historical settings would also find themselves disenfranchised. It was a way to let God's light shine through the church; a light that shown in the darkness of human despair and of society's injustice. It was a light that championed spiritual freedom and intellectual curiosity, that proclaimed in the words of John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrims, that God "has yet more light and truth to break forth...."

The light of God that the UCC has tried to reflect for the world to see has been inclusive of all people and committed to justice on every level of the social order. We have taken risks because we believe God is an adventurer and one who takes risks for the creation God so loves. We even risk making mistakes rather than keeping our membership numbers safe. Our constitution says that the church of Jesus Christ must be willing, if necessary, to even die if that is what it takes to be faithful, to let God's light shine.

As we as members of the United Church continue into our future, how will we let it shine? I hope we will think outside our own walls into the global community that cries out for light. I hope we will nurture each other in the struggles of life and faith. I hope we will stand up for our planet and sustain its future. I hope for much more....

As we approach the season of Lent beginning this Wednesday night, we are offered a time out to think about how we will reflect light. Lent begins with winter and yet, over the course of 40 days, the cold shadows give way to lengthening days of light. The time of carnival (Mardi Gras) symbolizes with masks and costumes and revelry the dark side of the soul that we wish to keep hidden. Will God love us if we take off our masks and show our true selves? Will others love us? Will we have to tell some truth, some revelation of who we really are? When masks and costumes and distractions disappear, will anything true and beautiful be left of us?

Throughout history human beings have had a great ability to try and hide from others and most of all from God. And when I say "God" I mean something very, very large and encompassing of all that is good in the world. To some God is spirit; to others God takes on human characteristics, to others God is a force to be reckoned with and employed to make things better in the world. Certainly God is all of the above and more than we can ever imagine.

The glory of God that shown through Jesus did not keep Jesus from dying. And the glory of God that is longing to shine through us will not keep us from suffering. Faith is a paradox of agony and ecstasy, of movement and retreat, of fulfillment and denial. It is a journey into the wilderness for at least 40 days to think about what glory is inside of us destined to emerge.

Nelson Mandela spent most of his life in that wilderness; struggling to let his most radiant self (God in him) shine forth. He spent years in prison, years in darkness, and yet he never lost hope and faith in the light. And so we remember these words from his inaugural address to his native land:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

Every moment in time is a new moment; one in which the past can be repeated over and over or a moment in which we can live purposefully, choosing to open ourselves to God's spirit yearning to shine forth through us and through the church into a world where there is a great deal need for more light. So people of God, let it shine!