

We Are Given

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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Once some visitors were given a tour of a grease factory. All the machinery they saw was impressive. Wheels were turning, machines were whirring, workers were bustling, forklifts were running, several buildings were a beehive of activity. At the end of the tour they came to a warehouse with barrels and barrels of the final product, top quality grease. Then one of the visitors asked the key question, "What is the market for all this grease?"

The tour guide had a blank look on his face. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well," asked the visitor, "is there a domestic market, do you export it? Who do you sell the grease to?"

"Oh. We don't sell the grease. We use all of it to lubricate our machinery!"

Our lives have a purpose. It is a purpose beyond existence. It is a purpose beyond maintenance. It is a purpose beyond possessing. Our purpose is to give and to be a gift.

Peter, James and John went walking with Jesus. They followed him up a mountain. At the top he was changed before their eyes. They saw him in a dazzling light. The greatest prophets of the past, Moses and Elijah appeared next to him. Jesus was revealed to them as the Messiah, the anointed one of God; and the voice which came out of a cloud makes clear just what it all means: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." Then Jesus led his disciples back down the mountain into the valley to heal, to teach, to love, and to journey to the cross.

The purpose of Jesus' life is illuminated when he goes to the mountaintop. It is not to stay on the mountaintop, but to give himself for the sake of the world.

Today we celebrate communion, and we again see the meaning of our lives in the very loaf of bread that we share. Like the bread, we are chosen, we are blessed, we are broken and we are given.

Jesus' Transfiguration reminds us that he has been chosen and blessed. We see it in the light that shines from him, in the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and most explicitly in the voice that comes from the clouds: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

This revelation on the mountaintop is also, paradoxically, a moment in which he embraces his brokenness.

This transfiguration story is found in almost the same form in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. A detail from Luke, not mentioned in Mark or Matthew, sheds particular light on the meaning of this experience. "Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him," says Luke, as we also read in Matthew and Mark. But then Luke adds: "They appeared in glory and **were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**" (Luke 9:30-31)

Which is why Jesus does not for a moment entertain Peter's suggestion that they build some shelter and just hang-out there on the mountain with Moses and Elijah.

The life of the beloved is a glorious life. But the Bible has an unusual way of defining glory. The scriptures tell us that Jesus was glorified when he hung on the cross. Glory is perfection in love, being at one with the will of God. Peter, James and John thought they had found glory on the mountaintop, and their first reaction was to stay there. Let's build

dwelling! But the path to glory was down the mountain and through the valley. The story of the Transfiguration comes on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. It is the culmination of this season of light that began with the star of Bethlehem. And it is the threshold to the season of Lent. The dazzling light of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop illumines the way to the cross. Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop is the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem.

We are not chosen so that we can congratulate one another for our special-ness. We are not blessed so that we can bask in our blessedness. We are not broken so that we can wallow in self-pity.

We are chosen, blessed and broken so that we can be given. We are chosen because God intends to redeem creation and chooses us to participate in the working out of that purpose. We are blessed in order to be a blessing. Our brokenness is the reality of our existence through which we discover how much we have to give.

Henri Nouwen suggests that when we, the Beloved Children of God – Chosen, Blessed and Broken – when we are given, a miracle happens akin to the multiplication of loaves when Jesus fed the crowd on the mountainside. There, too, Jesus took the 5 loaves that were offered, blessed them, broke them, and gave them to more than 5,000 people to eat, and when they had been nourished, 12 baskets of leftovers were collected.

“How different would our life be were we truly able to trust that it multiplied in being given away! How different would our life be if we could but believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it ... and that – even then – there will be leftovers!” (p. 123)

Recently the world acknowledged the passing of Sir Edmond Hillary. *[Slide 10]* He was a New Zealand beekeeper who, in 1953, with his Sherpa guide and friend, Tenzing Norkay, climbed Mount Everest. Now there's a mountaintop experience if there ever was one. And oddly enough, this mountaintop experience has an ending much like the one in the Bible. After Hillary had climbed Mount Everest, he became an overnight celebrity. Queen Elizabeth knighted him. His name appeared on sleeping bags, tents, and bootlaces. He could have lived in his little dwelling of success for the rest of his life.

But he didn't! Edmund Hillary spent the next thirty plus years in the foothills of Everest, in Nepal, working with the Sherpas whom he came to respect, admire and love. An elderly Sherpa from Khumjung village, the hometown of most of the Sherpas on his Everest ascent, had come to him a few years after that expedition and said, "Our children lack education. They are not prepared for the future. What we need more than anything is a school in Khumjung."

Hillary created the Himalayan Trust to provide funds to help improve living conditions for the Sherpas. He helped build 22 schools where there were none. The trust built a hospital and established health clinics, changing the prior reality, when half of the Sherpa youth died before they were 20.

All Hillary and Norkay left on the summit of Mount Everest was a bar of chocolate, a few biscuits and footprints in the snow. Hillary's great achievement is not his famous mountaintop experience. His most shining achievement will forever be the less publicized transfiguration of life among his friends in the foothills of Nepal.

The voice at the transfiguration said, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." Then Jesus proceeded to lead his disciples back down the mountain, through the valley, to another hill outside of Jerusalem, where he would give himself away that the all the world might have life. Let us follow Jesus.