

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Transfiguration Sunday, February 27, 2022  
Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36  
“Living a Transformed Life”  
By Rev. Sue Trigger

Exodus 34:29–35

(CEB)

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two covenant tablets in his hand, Moses didn't realize that the skin of his face shone brightly because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw the skin of Moses' face shining brightly, they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called them closer. So Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and Moses spoke with them. After that, all the Israelites came near as well, and Moses commanded them everything that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went into the Lord's presence to speak with him, Moses would take the veil off until he came out again. When Moses came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see that the skin of Moses' face was shining brightly. So Moses would put the veil on his face again until the next time he went in to speak with the Lord.

Luke 9:28–36

(NRSV)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found

alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

We are standing on holy ground, and I know that there are angels all around. Let us praise Jesus now, we are standing in his presence, on holy ground.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we pause to think about the mountain top experiences of Moses and Jesus. The transfiguration of Jesus is an important moment in Jesus' life. It was a powerful, visual image that revealed the holiness of Jesus.

I want you to take a moment and think about a time when something moved you here at Grace Covenant. It may have been a mountaintop experience, it may have been a worship service, a piece of music, a conversation with someone, something that made you feel closer to God. I want you to remember the feelings and think about how it feels to remember that experience. If you don't have a memory of an experience, imagine what you would like an experience with God to feel like. What would it look like?

Moments like those you have remembered and imagined are so important because they are a part of your transfiguration. I can't guarantee that you will have an experience that will change your hair to white and cause you to glow. On the other hand....

But I am concerned that the opportunity to encounter God in a worshipping community is decreasing. The pandemic has forced the Church to see a reality that we would rather not look at. Something is wrong with the Christian Church in America. The Barna research group reported that in 2021 non-practicing Christians have grown from 35% to 43% from 2000 to 2020. During the same time, practicing

Christians declined from 45% to 25%. Non-Christians or agnostic rose from 20% to 32%. The same study found weekly church attendance had declined from 45% in 1993 to 29% in 2020. There are a lot of statistics that are troubling, but this one is very concerning. In 2021 38% of clergy considered leaving ministry. Many did.

The numbers confirm what we have feared, the church is in need of a transfiguration. Some would call it revitalization. When the Session discussed signing on to the Matthew 25 initiative of the PCUSA we committed to the three emphases: eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism, and building congregational vitality. On this Transfiguration Sunday, I want to focus on the latter – building congregational vitality.

As I said, the pandemic has forced the Church to take a hard look at itself and what we are finding is concerning. Matt Reynolds is pastor and writer who wrote, “The time for reckoning has come. The consumer oriented version of Christianity that has dominated much of North America is finally seeing a needful death. Declining worship attendance, church closures, warring megachurch personalities, constant scandal, and other factors have sounded a death rattle. Our current moment, in which we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic and significant social unrest, has hammered the nail into the coffin.”<sup>i</sup>

That is a bold assertion. Reynolds explained part of the problem. “...our typical church growth attractional methods simply don’t work anymore in a post-Christendom context where church attendance is no longer the cultural norm. It doesn’t matter how good your product is if no one is shopping for it in the first place.” Reynolds takes it a step further, “It’s not just that attractional methods stopped working. They specifically helped to create the reality of malformed

discipleship we now live in as a church. Even if we did not vocalize it, we have implicitly taught people by our methodology that the church exists to scratch their spiritual itch.”

Our method is our message, and that message forms people. The methodology of church growth practices for at least the last three decades has looked something like this. “We have what you want. We have what your family will like. Stuff for your kids! Sports stuff! All the self-help studies you could ever desire! We have cappuccino, music that you won’t hate, services that won’t impose on your Sunday schedule, language that makes you feel like you’re hanging out with your dudes, trendy pastors to make you feel cooler than you really are. Come and get it at our church.” Reynolds calls it a kind of bait and switch. Get them in the door and hope they catch some Jesus along the way. Sadly, it doesn’t work.

I imagine that hearing this is making you a little uncomfortable. Believe me, it makes me a lot uncomfortable. I have to admit that I have been sucked into the consumer church mentality, it’s really hard not to be when you’re a church educator. An educator’s job is all about building the most attractive programs to draw the most people. The first 13 years of my career in the church sound a lot like what Reynolds described. I’ve worked hard to create what you want, stuff your family will like, stuff for your kids, all the self-help classes you could want... I am complicit in contributing to the very thing that is killing Christianity in our nation.

The Southern Baptist church is contributing some excellent perspective to this problem of American Christianity. Tony Wolfe is the director of Church Relations at the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. Wolfe suggests that the Church has modeled itself after something that is not Biblical that puts the self, rather than Christ

at the center. The “Come and see” model of ministry we’ve developed over the last 100 years has produced several generations of Christians who assume the church is about them, for them, and because of them.

Wolfe says, “Churches work so hard at having the best music, the most dynamic preacher, the most comfortable facility, the coolest kids programs and the most up-to-date technology in their worship services. There is a constant pressure on the church leadership toward those expectations. And when the church is not “meeting our needs” or “living up to our expectations” members shop around.

Wolfe says, “this vastly unbiblical phenomenon drives pastors and church leaders insane. It’s often this very issue that leads them to burn-out.” However; he goes on to say that church leaders may only be sleeping in the bed we’ve made for ourselves. Maybe we have a consumer-driven Christian culture because we’ve been selling a product instead of embodying a mission?<sup>ii</sup>

I am going to share 7 markers of a consumer driven Christianity. Perhaps you have heard or experienced some of these.

1. A consumer Christian comes to church to be served. The church exists to nurture me, to affirm me, to guide me.
2. The consumer Christian feels like somehow they have done enough, served enough, given enough or said enough to earn special treatment. So when the church doesn’t give it to them, they become bitter about it.
3. In a consumer Christian community, people often don’t trust the leaders of the church. They are often skeptics of other people’s ideas. People need to know how something is going to benefit them before they are on board with an idea.

4. In a consumer community, people point fingers when there are problems. The problem is always with the way those people act, those people worship, those people vote. The problem is the way those people are doing things.
5. A consumer Christian focuses on their personal preferences.
6. A consumer Christian focuses on what they will gain from being part of the church. They offer love with conditions. I will participate until you do something I don't like, then I'll shop for a new church.
7. A consumer Christian has trouble finding a church family because they are always searching for the perfect church.

It's hard to hear these things, but I share them with you today because the first step toward transformation is awareness of the problem. We are in need of God's transforming power, and the first step is to shift our focus from ourselves, and focus on Christ – who is the head of the Church.

This isn't really a new situation. The Bible describes a similar situation with Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob had a genuine belief in God's promises, but he failed to live in confidence of what God would do for him, so he dressed up as his brother to steal his birthright. Jacob wanted to set the standard of his faith. In Genesis 28 Jacob sounded like a consumer Christian when he said, "If God does all these things, then the Lord will be my God." One commentator wrote that Jacob's relentless drive to gain benefits for himself reveals how his fears made him resistant to God's transforming grace. Eventually, Jacob ended up wrestling all night with a mysterious man in whom Jacob saw God face to face. In this encounter, Jacob called out for God's blessing and his life was transformed. Jacob serves as an important example for us. He shows us that when we believe in God's promises, we will be less inclined toward manipulating circumstances to benefit ourselves.

Nolan Huber is a writer who asks us to think about what it would look like to a contributing Christian. He shares that he went through a spiritual crises when his church didn't take care of him the way he thought they should. He was a young pastor who was serving his first church, far away from home. He became disgruntled when the church didn't nurture him enough. He was upset that the church didn't guide him nearly enough, and he was hurt that the congregation didn't affirm him enough. He came to a point when he realized that he was expecting his church to give him something that only God could give him. It almost ruined him until he reframed his relationship with the church from a consumer Christian to a contributing Christian.

A contributing Christian comes to serve rather than to be served.

A contributing Christian is enthralled, in awe, and deeply grateful for any love, forgiveness, grace and hospitality because they understand that I can't be earned, but is a gift of God's grace.

A contributing Christian is the person who asks what the church leaders need in order to accomplish whatever the goal is. They have a deep trust that God is doing something through other people.

A contributing Christian doesn't point the finger at others to blame them but instead asks how they may have contributed to a problem. Jesus never told me to tell others how to love me better. He told me to focus on how I love others better. A contributing Christian is great at shame free self-reflection and honest communication with others so that problems may be reconciled.

A contributing Christian is focused on the needs of others. They are more focused on the mission of Jesus than their personal preferences. The goal is to open a place for someone else to come to know Jesus.

A contributing Christian gives with no expectation of anything in return. They understand that their giving – whether it be a pledge, their time, or other resources, are given to make it possible for God’s work to be done through this community. They sacrifice their wants for the sake of others.

Lastly, a contributing Christian can embrace the beautiful and the messy parts of a church community because they understand that Jesus has embraced both the beautiful and the messy parts of themselves. <sup>iii</sup>

Jesus endured the messy and embraced the beautiful because of love. To be a follower of Christ is to embrace both the beautiful and messy parts of ourselves and each other because of love. The truth is that the Church is both a beautiful and messy place. Let’s begin a transfiguration of the Church today by remembering that we are standing on holy ground. This congregation is a holy, not of our own making, but of God’s. Set apart for a special purpose, not of our own making, but God’s. This is holy ground, not just when we are together in worship, but when we meet for a committee meeting or a Session meeting, a Bible study or a game night. The work we have been entrusted with is holy work, designed by God, modeled for us by Jesus. We are in the presence of God, may we be transfigured into holiness and turn our focus on the work of love.



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<sup>i</sup> “Reynolds, Matt, The Death Rattle of Consumer Christianity, Firebrand Magazine, July 20, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Wolfe, Tony, Consumer Christianity and Sunday Morning Products, United Baptist Association, February 11, 2020

<sup>iii</sup> Huber, Nolan, 7 Differences Between a Consumer Christian and a Contributing Christian, Faithhacking.ca. April 27, 2018.