

Sermon for the Feast of the Transfiguration

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Last week, for the first time in my seven years here, I got to see our bell! Thanks to the painters and that big lift, I got a close-up view of that 170 year old, thousand pound beauty sitting quietly hidden high above any mere mortal's line of sight. But neat as it is, it's not actually the bell itself that struck me. While we were up there, we also got a close look at the cross that's sat above our door for twenty-some-odd years. It's a replica of the unusual one at the UpJohn church down in New Berlin. Before then, our cross was a pair of spindles, simple but disproportionately small for our building. Anyway, we got a look at that cross, and it was bad news. There was a lot of rot, even places where the wood had disintegrated from the inside out, and all that remained of the structure was a shell of paint. The carpenter got one look and asked the painters to be extra careful taking it down, because if he was going to make a new one, he needed the old one more or less intact. The wood was so rotten that a tight grip crumbled one of the points completely, crushed by nothing more than a man's grip. Even the nails meant to hold it in place did little good. The wood simply flaked away as the workers lifted the cross out of its place without a single tool needed. Thankfully, the carpenter was happy with what finally came down to guide his work. While we were up there, I got a good look at the roof, too. Y'all, it's steep. I mean, obviously. Earlier this year, a roofer scurried up a ladder leaned against the vesting room, then clambered up to the top ridge. From the sidewalk, I was impressed, but now that I've seen the roof from up there, I'm convinced that roofers are missing a part of their brains meant for self preservation.

All told, here's what I learned this week: the work we're doing right now's needed. That brown's gonna be breathtaking. The walkway's gorgeous. Our new sign's gonna fit with all these improvements beautifully. And the moss gettin' cleared off'll be icing on the cake. Once this wave of stuff happens, we'll have some breathing room for a little bit, and then we'll get rolling again on more and more and more. With all these projects building off of other projects, I've been thinking about this scene from the show Malcolm in the Middle. Hal, the dad, comes home and flips on the lightswitch, but the bulb's broken, so he goes to the shelf where he keeps extra bulbs, and it's off-kilter so he goes to the drawer where he keeps the screwdriver to fix the shelf, but the drawer squeaks, so he goes to the garage to get some WD-40, but the can's empty, so he gets in the car to pick up more, but the car won't start. His wife comes home, finds him covered in oil under the car, and asks if he ever did get around to fixing that broken lightbulb. Hal sits up, exasperated, and says "What does it look like I'm doing?" All that to say, there's a lot going on, a lot needs doing, and a lot more we're sure to find along the way.

The problem is, we're gonna have to pay for it. And I want to brag about the Holy Spirit here for a second, because it's kinda amazing how this's panned out. All these projects we're doing this summer, not a cent was raised from St. Thomas' to make it happen. Here's how it's come together. I was sitting in my office feeling a little punchy and made a smart aleck post on my personal Facebook page. It was something along the lines of "hey, if you have a million dollars you want to give my church, I'd be happy to take it off your hands." We did not get a million dollars, but we did get \$1,050 from people that have no connection to us! On top of that, Emmanuel Church down in Norwich gave us two grants, and the Diocese gave us another. That property we had up on Hill Road, well the sale's finally gone through! That's gonna be a huge part of covering all this. (And how we got that land in the first place's a Holy Spirit moment, too. That's a story for another day.) This is the coolest one, though: we had this old fund that St. Thomas' has been trying to close for years before I got here to no avail. But one day, sitting in my office fretting about how we were gonna pay for all this, the phone rang. It was a lawyer covering the account. They could no longer manage it, he said, and would we like the check sent to us or would we rather not get the money? Y'all.

There are times when I kinda forget that I work for a church. Like, sometimes I run the office like a non-profit and forget to say my prayers, or I get caught up in the details and forget to have a little faith. And then I fret and worry and add nothing to life but stress knots in my shoulders. And all that rubs off on other people, and together we list a little too much to one side and start to think this all depends on us. This work, this ministry, this church surely depend on us showing up and working ourselves silly. Then God shows up and reminds us in the most immaculate ways just how upside down we've got it. Now, I don't want to sound like we don't have any work to do, but it's an amazingly powerful reminder where we sit in the scope of God's church. It's like that bell on top of that tower. It's so easy to forget it's there, but when we ring it, beauty tolls out.

It's tempting to look at these readings, stories about two of our biggest religious ancestors, and think that they're about us. Moses' face shone when he met God. And Jesus' shone on top of that mountain. And that's how we know they're holy. And maybe, just maybe, if we live right and work hard enough, we'll start glowing, too. But I don't think that's quite it. This story's about God, not us. God shows up and reminds us how beautiful things are when we remember that God's got this. Whether it's in the wilderness or among friends, God shows up and God surprises. That's our story over and over. We worry that it all comes down on our shoulders, and then the phone rings with a miraculous windfall. Our church's getting a facelift, sure. But that's not transfiguration; that's a paint job. And yet. There is divine work at play. All this we're doing proclaims that we're still here. We've had years of folks walking by and never knowing we are here. Well, they know it now. Those hotdogs we gave away on July 4th, they couldn't ignore us. They might've said no thank you, but they still engaged. That free coffee on Tuesdays, that sandwich board out front, it's not about coffee, not really. It's about welcome and making sure people know we're thinking about them, filling a need they might not've even known they had. That walkway says you're welcome here and we want you to come in. We've literally removed the stumbling blocks. That paint says we want you to experience some beauty as you walk to work, and we're planning on being here for a long time. And that bell, way up high, tolls our insistent existence. I'm sure we have a neighbor or two that might not love a 10 AM wake up call every Sunday. But it's beautiful, and when that bell rings it's unmistakably a church bell. A thousand pounds singing its own song and carrying its message as far as sound'll travel. And sometimes the blowing wind of the Spirit carries that message a little farther.

Our painters said, that when they were working on the Baptist Church, no one told them the bell rings on the hour. The first time they heard it high on their lift, they were right next to it. As you might imagine, they jumped, gave thanks for safety harnesses, and tried to rub the ringing out of their ears. And then they noticed something cool. When the bells toll -- the Baptist bells, the Catholic bells, our bell, doesn't matter -- when the bells toll, at street level, we hear an initial ring and then a little reverb, and then the sounds of the world take over. But when you're up next to 'em, the bells toll, and then they keep ringing quieter and quieter to a barely perceptible hum that lasts a full minute and continues sending out waves long after our ears can pick 'em up. A single strike lingering in the air long after any of us knows.

And I think that's kinda us. We're the bells of the church. Most of the time, we're just here, being in our place. But once in a while, we sing our song, and some folks love it, some don't, but we sing our beauty anyway. Beauty that comes with the knowledge that it's not all up to us, that God's here, too. Beauty that adds something to the air, fills it with our message of love. And that message reverberates for a mighty long time after we're done, ringing out, shaking the ether and claiming an entire stretching moment as sacred. We have no idea how some of these things happen. And we have even less of an idea how our words and our actions move other people's lives. Believe it or not, that's part of why we're doing all this. A little paint sprucing up a building brightens someone's day. People admire our walkway like they're at a museum. Beauty matters. That change matters. I don't completely understand it, but I trust God knows what God's getting up to.

We've been talking a lot about sabbath, which is funny to think about with all this work going on. But sabbath's about setting everything else aside to focus on God. In some ways, all that work is just stones and paint. But in others, it's so much more. It's the sacred proclamation that beauty in this all-too-often ugly world matters. It's a reminder of glowing faces speaking with God. It's a message in itself, a message of security and safety and concern for how our existence affects those that aren't a part of us. By the time this glow-up's done, our beauty'll ring out, and with it our claim that God is here and God's still getting up to something. And wouldn't we all like to know what that something is? I can't say I know what God's up to fully, but I trust it's gonna be beautiful and it's gonna be filled with love.

One last thing: up on that mountain, Peter's so overcome he wants to set up a place to stay, but Jesus' got bigger fish to fry. This is a place to remember, not a place to stay. The same's true for us. This beautiful church we claim as home is a place to remember, a place to return week after week, but it is not a place to stay. It's just as important that we leave this place. Like our bell ringing across town, like our paint visible from Curtis Lumber, like our cross carried all the way to Norwich in the back of a carpenter's pickup, we've got a message to put out there. And that message is as simple as the sunrise and just as breathtaking: it's love. Our message is love. God loves you. We love you. Come on home, and learn to love. And once you do, ring it out again: God is love. We love you. And ring it out again, 'cause there's no unringing that bell, that God is love.