

The Big Picture

^{NRS} Mat 17:1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Seeing the big picture can change everything.

When I was in high school one my absolute favorite painting was *Joie de Vivre* by Henri Matisse. It's one of his wildest, most passionate works with incredible, bold colors bleeding all over the canvas and with these pagan figures dancing and embracing and playing music. *Joie de Vivre* means the joy of living, and it's a perfect description. The painting is just a riot of color and life- and I loved it. I loved it enough to get a print of it to hang in my bedroom. In fact it still hangs on the wall of my bedroom- Melis graciously suffers it even though it doesn't really go with much.

When we lived in New Jersey, one day we went up to New York one day for Melis to interview with graduate business programs. So as she went off to some upscale hotel on Fifth Avenue all decked out in her interviewing regalia, I headed down fifth avenue along Central Park in my tennis shoes for a day at the museums. I hit the Guggenheim first. What an incredible building- it's like one enormous, gentle spiral staircase going down and down. That day I liked the building better than the art- their

main exhibit was of clothes from the 1980's. Yikes. All those shoulder pads and perms...it was like I was stuck in a Madonna video.

Then, I hit the MoMa, the Museum of Modern Art. The building was in lousy shape, they were working on it- so I got in half price. And many of the collections were closed due to the construction, but it didn't matter. Unbeknownst to me the Barnes foundation who owns Joie de Vivre had leant the painting to the MoMa for an exhibit on the fauvists. And so, within about 10 minutes of wandering around I turned a corner and there it was. I found myself face to face with the painting, and I was absolutely stunned. For one thing the colors didn't look anything like the print I had- they were so much brighter and wilder. And the size. The size! The thing was enormous. It was over seven feet high and over 10 feet wide- it took up an entire wall. I've always enjoyed art, but it was the first time in my life my breath was actually taken away. I found myself just standing there underneath it, in awe, in wonder of this thing. How did he do it? And what was he like? The man capable of creating this living, breathing monster of a piece?

You know, before that day, if you had asked me did I know Matisse, and did I know the painting Joie de Vivre I would have been excited to tell you yes I know it well. And yeah, in a line up of other paintings I could have picked Joie de Vivre out. But then standing there in front of the real thing, seeing the big picture, in this case a literal big picture, well I realized I hadn't really known it at all. Seeing the big picture changed everything for me.

This was what it was like for those three disciples that day, Peter, James, and John, as they were hiking up that mountain with Jesus. As they were making the painful schlep up to the top, making the painful realization that sandals really weren't meant for mountaineering, I imagine they felt like they knew the man who they were walking with- I imagine they felt as if they knew Jesus.

After all, he had picked them out. He had called them by name. And they had been walking with him for two years or so by this point. They ate with him. Slept next to him. Listened to his teachings. And the things he did...well they'd never seen anything like it before. So, I imagine they felt like they knew him pretty well at that point.

But the Gospels are clear about anything, it's that they didn't. One of the most significant themes of all four gospels is how even Jesus' closest disciples never really understood him- something the church today would do well to remember. Even when the disciples got it right, like Peter in the text right before this, he still manages to screw it up. Peter tells Jesus that he suspects he's the Messiah. And Jesus tells Peter that's the first right answer he's had in two years. But then what does Peter do? Well then he argues with the teacher telling him there was no way he's going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, that he's working on a plan. And Jesus' response? Get behind me Satan. From gold star to Satan, just like that. I love it. Peter thought he knew Jesus.

And that wasn't the only time the disciples weren't getting Jesus. Remember when Jesus saw that herd of kids, and he stoops down to welcome them. But then the disciples go all secret service on him, setting up a barricade and telling the kids to get lost, that the teacher has important work to do. And Jesus barks at them telling them

those kids *are* his work, telling them these kids belong to the kingdom of heaven...but the jury is still out on them. The disciples thought they knew Jesus.

And then when they get to the top- it's this amazing scene isn't. It's like something out of Steven Spielberg. The winds are tearing around. Lights are flashing around them. Strange clouds are rolling in. And in the midst of all this, in the midst of this chaos- it's in the midst of all this that they actually see Jesus. See him for real. It's on the mountain top they see his face bright shining like the sun. It's on the mountain top they see even his clothes are shining. It's on the mountain top they hear the voice of God name Jesus as son, and beloved. Up there, they catch a glimpse of him in the fullness of his being- and they see he's more than just a teacher or a healer. And they finally start to sense that what they're taking part is bigger and far more important than they knew. They finally catch a glimpse of the big picture, and it changes everything for them- in their case it throws them to the ground, their bodies overcome with fear.

And shouldn't it? It seems to me one of the worst things about church is how we talk so much about God. Some days we talk so much about God, if I were a stranger here just listening in it would look and sound to me as if we actually think know who God is really. And of course we really don't. One of the most dangerous things about the church is that we can turn the almighty God who created heaven and earth into a kind of hobby- something we do for an hour or so on Sunday and hey a potluck, too. And in our casualness, it's so easy to forget that we all gather here in the presence of a holy mystery, wider, deeper and infinitely more interesting and frightening than anything else we'll meet.

I mean can anybody imagine this scene happening here? Do any of us expect that when we start to pray the wind might pick up a bit. And when we say together for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever- do any of us expect light to burst into the room and surround us and pervade us and to actually see one another as God does? Can you imagine this?

What would happen to our differences if we actually saw one another as God does, our little disagreements?

What would happen to our priorities?

Do we even want to see the big picture?

Of course, while this picture of Jesus in all his glory is bigger than the one the disciples have before going up to the mountain top- it isn't the whole picture, is it? It isn't how the story ends anyway.

Transfiguration Sunday isn't really a great name for today. Transfiguration Sunday makes it sound as if there's only one change that takes place, that Jesus turns into magic-light-up-Jesus and that's that. It makes it sound like they only go up the mountain. But really there are two transfigurations that take place- the first is with the light and all; the second, the second is when Jesus transforms back and goes back down the mountain.

See, if we only think Transformation Sunday as being about the knock you down majesty of God, we're not actually seeing the really big picture here. Because after all the fireworks are over. After the teamsters have moved off all the stage equipment- the second transfiguration takes place. Jesus leaves the lights behind, and settles for his

dusty cloak again. And then he does something absolutely unique in all of scripture. He touches his friends.

Now, this may not sound like much. After all, Jesus touches a lot of people- he touches lepers to heal them, he touches blind men to give sight to their eyes, and he allows himself to be touched- by the woman with the hemorrhage, by the sinful woman who massaged his feet with her hair. But in the Bible he never touches the disciples- never, not once. Except here. So what we see here is that Jesus isn't merely transfigured into power- he's also transfigured into gentleness, a gentleness and kindness even the disciples hadn't yet known.

It's such a tender moment with them trembling on the ground, isn't it? Then, he touches them. Tells them to stand. And he says to them, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid. And seeing Christ's transfiguration into power as well as into simple gentleness, now *this* is a big picture, a grand picture indeed- and it will have to last them. Matthew tells us the four of them will meet alone again exactly once more- and it will be at the Garden of Gethsemene. And there Jesus will be transfigured yet again, only then it will not be into glory or gentleness, but into fear and agony.

You know, when I was standing in the MoMa seeing Joie de Vivre in all it's glory, one thought came very clearly into my head. I knew I was going to have to get rid of my print. Having seen the real thing, and having experienced it in all it's glory, there was no way I was going to go back with that little scrap on my wall. It just didn't seem right to me. It seemed like a desecration. Part of me would rather have nothing than have something so pathetic.

And to this day I don't know why I didn't act on this. The interior decorator in Melis probably wishes I did. Our bedroom would probably look a little better. But I didn't. And I'm glad. For as much as I loved seeing the mountain top version of Joie de Vivre, as much as I was changed standing in front of it, today I value the little print I've had since high school just as much- and in some ways more.

See, as much as it's great to climb up the mountains and receive their good tidings, we aren't meant to live there. The print I have. It isn't perfect. It's nothing like the real thing. But you know. I look at it from time to time when I'm sitting on my bed writing or reading, especially when it's been raining outside for two months. And it brightens my day. It lifts me up. And this is enough. I'll always remember catching a glimpse of the real thing. But anytime I want I can look at my print. And in the big picture, the truly big picture, we need the mountain top *and* the valley; the visionary and the mundane.

In the name of the powerful, gentle one who takes us up to the mountain, and walks back down with us again, and who tells us no matter what happens do not be afraid. **Amen.**