

**Sermon “Little Boxes on the Hillside” Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Shadow Rock UCC, Phoenix, AZ
Feb. 3, 2008, Scripture Matthew 17: 1-8 Transfiguration Sunday**

This is the first time that Jesus invited his closest friends, Peter, James and John to share in his most intimate prayer. Here they saw his face shining. The second time though, he took them to the garden of Gethsemane. There they saw his face in anguish and his sweat falling to the ground like great drops of blood. When we see God in Glory we will also see God in misery, says Henri Nouwen in his book, “Jesus A Gospel.”

This story has significance for us as a community of faith. It points to the work of the church, to increase the love of God and of neighbor. How so?

In this first encounter, Jesus is passing the mantle of the kingdom on to his disciples, and namely these Three. What better way, says Henri Nouwen, to commission the disciples to love the world *than by demonstrating that being Beloved means extending love to others!* Isn't that the work of the church? He continues: *“The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and un-limiting acceptance of us as beloved children, and acceptance so full, so total and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised and admired, and free for God who leads us on the road of service.”*

Yet so often we try to short circuit that work of the church, and even the movement of the Spirit, by putting road blocks up, hurdles that we must jump over, or simply by imposing our own idea of what it means to be the community of faith or to be human, a child of God.

In the short time I've been with you, I've come to appreciate your story and journey. For institutions, like individuals, also go through cycles; we all go through growth, and refinement. At this time, you've experienced peaks and valleys, there has been turmoil and some are asking “how long, how long?” Yet in this period of what seems like a never ending time, you have progressed, you have grown, you have solidified, and you have benefitted from experiencing different styles of pastoral leadership. Last week you celebrated Lori's ministry and yes, strong feelings were shared of sorrow, mixed with joy. She is moving on to another ministry where the gifts you helped her form, will be used with others. You have helped form her, as she helped form you, and the same will happen between us. I will be influenced by you and you will be influenced by me.

People have heard me say that regardless of how long a pastor remains, there will be a beginning and an ending. We clergy are all interims. Our ministry is to equip others for ministry, to be a presence, a reminder of what it means to be fully human and fully divine.

In this story, of the Transfiguration though, is the element of trying to curtail, capture and hold onto the essence of the spiritual. Peter does this by suggesting that three booths be built to honor, remember, and capture this moment. Instead, the voice reminds us of our work: to be active in the sharing of the love of God. I'm sure some people recall the song “Little Boxes on the Hillside, little boxes made of ticky tack and they all look just the same.”

Let's be forthright: that can happen with churches as well! Shadow Rock could very well be the same as any other church. But the story is that it is not the same as any other church. You have a covenant that points to the future, invites people to join you on the journey into the unknown, just as William Shatner and the crew of the Enterprise went ahead, to explore new worlds.

Shadow Rock now, at this place and time is reclaiming the story, redefining its future, and developing opportunities for the three elements common to us as a community of faith.

These three elements, contemplation, companionship and compassion, are opportunities for experiencing the love and grace of God. “Contemplation” is experienced through programs, worship, music, arts, education. We come to realize that God loves each of us as we are and as we are becoming.

The second, “COMPANIONSHIP” is done with others. Jesus didn’t go alone to the mountain; he took others. Our faith, is not one that is experienced in isolation, but is experience in concert with others. Oh, there are times, when it is good to be in aloneness, but it is always necessary to come down from the mountaintop. In the early Christian community, people went out to the mountains and deserts to experience God alone. Later people realized that it was necessary for companionship, to be in community. We need each other.

The third element is that of compassion. We can’t hold onto the experience alone, we must share it as God shares it in a variety of ways and through many different people, like Moses, Mohammad, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Martin Luther King Jr, Gandhi, as well as cultures like Native American.

COMPASSION is seen through Shadow Rock’s involvement of ministries for outreach, social justice, equality, and taking risks, yes, risks, for the disenfranchised, poor, and unemployed.

So, what will happen in this interim with me? We’ll work on those three items: contemplating what it is that God is calling us to do—a vision; sharing with others in education, conversation, cottage meetings, and thirdly, continue our work of compassion, sharing, and peace and justice work.

The covenant of Shadow Rock and the wedge blade symbol also speaks of these three elements, contemplation—through study of the word; companionship as seen in the words “our task together, our life together” and compassion as evidenced in the local and global work, study, programs, peace and justice work. As with each generation, the covenant needs to be clarified and understood. Christianity, in the last 20 years, has experienced refinement, renewal, and transformation of what it means to be a Christian. Churches also go through stages of growth. Just as with a child, there is childhood, youth, teenage year of time of stress, rebelling, renewing, and finding one’s own way, Shadow Rock in this in-between time is wrestling with the future, learning from the past. The wedge-blade, has a cross, indicative of suffering, a point at the place where the two come together, while indicative of the future, is also piercing. The cross pierces the world where we are working together to bring hope, unity, justice, compassion. The future is ours. Transformation is always on-going; it never ends, just look at ourselves 20 years ago, and where we are now; we have been transformed inwardly and outwardly.

I close with a Jewish story of love that captures the message: There were two brothers who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each has his own granary. One of the brothers was married and had a large family; the other brother was single.

One day the single brother thought to himself, (this is the role of contemplation here), “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I

know what I'll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary." So, each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother's barn.

Now the married brother thought to himself, "It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I'll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary." And he did.

Each morning the two brothers (companionship here), were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many.

One night the two brothers met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. And they embraced, and loved each other deeply.

There is a legend that says God looked down from heaven, saw the two brothers embracing, and said, "I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here. It was also said that it was on that spot that Solomon build the first temple.

May God look down on this place here, Shadow Rock, for it too is a holy place, sharing the love of God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of endings and beginnings, claim us as your own. We want to go where you lead. We are eager to respond to people we can help. We are open to the guidance others have given to us and can give to us. Teach us.

Give us a double portion of the prophet's spirit for justice. Honor us with opportunities serve. We are listening for our voice. We are waiting, patiently. Instill in us all, that "in all things, all will be well, in all matter of things, all will be well."

As we share our journey with others, and they share theirs with us, we pray for those who health is failing, who are looking at surgery, who are fearful of the future and the unknown. Walk with them into the darkness and the cloud of unknowing.

We grieve at the loss of life due to conflicts and wars, from accidents and misunderstandings. We do pray for peace and commit ourselves and our resources to the uplifting of that which promotes life, wholeness and harmony.

Empower each of us in our personal lives, and our church. We are daring to trust and to go forward.

Now in the quietness, in the silence we come to rest, to listen, to respond to your love for us....