



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year A –Epiphany Last – February 26, 2017

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Something happens to us when we’re in the presence of God. It creates what they call an ontological change, ontological change meaning that the nature of our being changes. After Peter told him he was the Messiah and Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem from Caesarea Philippi, Jesus changed and the only way he was going to live into that call was to be filled with the presence of God and so he was transfigured and the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus and the world would never be the same again.

You and I are constantly changing and the nature of our being is constantly changing. Sometimes it’s circumstances that bring that about and sometimes it’s us—you and me—who decide to bring that about.

Two years ago, I took a seven-week sabbatical where I made a visit to the island nation of Palau in the southern Pacific – the site of the horrific battle of Peleliu.

I’ve been to the island of Peleliu twice – once about 15 years ago and the last time, of course, during my sabbatical, and just two days after the Emperor and Empress of Japan had been there to offer prayers for peace.

On my first visit to Peleliu I was struck by stories I heard from a local resident there about how horrific the battle was and how US Marines tried to capture the airfield in an operation that they thought would take two or three days but that lasted several months – several months in the scorching heat and oppressive humidity and with very little water to drink. Then the feeling got even worse when I went up to the caves above the airfield and heard about how Japanese soldiers were routed out of them with flamethrowers and I cringed at the horror of war and the way that people suffered and lost their lives on that island and in that battle.

But then when I went to Peleliu last year, the journey had a different feel from the first one. This time I was with a Japanese tour group, one of three non-Japanese on the tour, and when the tour went to the memorial to Japanese soldiers to offer incense, I felt compelled even as a Christian priest to offer incense with them – and that was noted by them and they were touched – touched to the point where the tour guide made a special point of seeking me out to thank me privately for my gesture, commenting that I was the first American tourist he had ever seen do such a thing. And then afterwards in the spot where the Emperor and Empress offered prayers, I talked to a woman in the group who had placed a bouquet of tropical flowers at the memorial and when I asked her why, she said that she was there to say prayers for her uncle (her father’s brother) – a soldier in the Imperial Army of Japan who died defending the airfield against the US Marines in the Battle of Peleliu.

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She and I looked out over the ocean together and she told me the story of her uncle and she began to shed tears. Then I put my hand on her shoulder and said to her in my broken Japanese, “War is a terrible thing.”

Then we looked into each other’s eyes with a kind of knowing that goes beyond cognition – a knowing of the heart, a knowing from the na’au, and somehow we both felt a sense of peace, because, stirred by the Holy Spirit in the sea breeze that came offshore, the nature of our beings changed, and we were transfigured from two strangers into new friends on a three-hour tour. And in that moment of transfiguration, I believe that the island of Peleliu itself was also transfigured, transfigured from a place of war to a place of peace as we stood together and looked out in silence upon the emerald ocean, the golden waves lapping up over the coral reef, the beautiful clouds hanging in the sapphire blue sky, and the presence of God.

In and of itself, two strangers standing together and looking at the ocean doesn't seem like that big a deal in the grand scheme of things, but when we experience what may seem to us like small moments of transfiguration in our lives, they become a big deal, especially if we believe that we are the body of Christ and individually members of it (as Paul says in his letter to the Christians in Corinth). And as Desmond Tutu says:

*God places us in the world as his fellow workers-agents of transfiguration.
We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so there will
be more compassion and caring, that there will be more laughter and joy,
that there will be more togetherness in God's world.*

I know that there is something here at this Cathedral, something deep, something profoundly spiritual, something amazingly God-filled that draws me back in to be part of the community again after being away for seven years. Something is going on in this place—something good, something powerful, something special.

Part of my doctoral work this year is to undertake a series of interviews, talking with people in the Cathedral community about their lives, about their faith, and about their experience here. For years now all I’ve heard about St. Andrew’s Cathedral is the problems. And when I came here in January, someone actually said to me, “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

And I take it in stride, because when I sat with some of you in my office and listened to your stories and how much you love this Cathedral and how much you love God, how you long to serve God, how you yearn to feel God’s presence, I had an overwhelming sense of faith that we can and will courageously face any problems and challenges that may come our way. And I believe that because one of you said this amazing thing, “No one can make me leave my church, because when I sit in the Cathedral I feel the spirit of everyone who ever worshipped there.” And it that moment and with those words, I was transfigured, I was transfigured because I was home—and I am changed forever, changed forever because for me, this Cathedral is transfigured into a community who will do whatever we can to reach out and feel the presence of God. This Cathedral is the household of God.

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If you really think about it, for whatever reason, we all come to this place with some kind of brokenness, brokenness that's mirrored when we take the communion host and break it up into individual pieces for the people of God to come and take into themselves. What we're doing symbolically is that we're taking the body of Christ, a whole body, and breaking it up into little pieces, into fragments, which is why we call it the fraction—the body of Christ becomes broken.

And that seems kind of sad to me – that at the communion service we break up the body of Christ, but then when we think about it we realize that we make it all whole again when we walk away from the communion rail and go out into the world to do good works and to create our moments of transfiguration in our lives and in the lives of others. And when we do that, it's like were taking the broken communion host and putting it all back together again, collectively, through our good works to create a transfiguration of the whole in the body of Christ and that communion host becomes transfigured the way Jesus did atop that mountain 2,000 years ago and that, my friends, is incredible, beautiful and holy

So, let us continue to offer our small moments of transfiguration to the God we worship and the God we love, and let us offer our small moments of transfiguration in the confidence that it will contribute to the transfiguration of the world so that the face of Jesus will continue to shine and his clothes will continue to dazzle white through our prayers, through our affirmations, through our acts of kindness and compassion, and through the deep love we have for God and for one another. Amen.