



Pentecost 23
Proper 27 (A)

Have You Been Transfigured?

[RCL] Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Today, let's explore the problem known as burnout and the hope we call "transfiguration". In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In recent decades, "burnout" has become a popular word to describe a particular human problem. Burnout is commonly understood as what happens when someone becomes exhausted by a major activity in life. Many symptoms can be associated with burnout; that the word has become popular indicates that the problem may be common.

Today's gospel story about the foolish and prudent bridesmaids can be heard as a story about burnout. Some of the bridesmaids suffer burnout. They seem to lose their chance at life. Why does this happen to them and not to the others?

All ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom to appear. The custom is for them to escort him into the place where the wedding will occur. It is also the custom for him to delay his arrival as a practical joke!

And so, these girls, dressed in their bridesmaid gowns, wait, and they wait, and they wait. The sky grows dark, the sun sets, the evening hours pass. Finally, it's midnight, and all of them are asleep.

A shout of warning awakens them! Quickly, they attend to their lamps. Several of them have adequate fuel, and soon their lamps are glowing in the darkness. Others do not. They ask to borrow some, but there is none to spare. They go out to buy fuel—at a 24-hour convenience store, no doubt. While they are gone, the bridegroom finally arrives and is escorted inside by the remaining bridesmaids. The girls who went in search of fuel return too late. They are all dressed up, without any place to go. They are left outside in the dark, with the door shut. The story ends like a bad dream.

To experience burnout is to lose your chance. It is to be left outside. When burnout happens, we find it hard to light our lamps. The darkness remains dark. Because we are somewhere else when the action happens, we cannot recognize the bridegroom, rejoice at his arrival, and walk along the path with him. We never see his face.

Like the bridesmaids in the story, each of us needs a supply of fuel. How can we get our supply? We cannot borrow from someone else. No one can live our life for us. The fuel we use must be our own. Another way to say this is that each of us must have our own internal resources.

We gain resources when we participate in the worship of the assembled Church. Through word and sacrament and community, through hymns and prayers and gestures, fuel for our lamps becomes available to us.

For this to happen, we must allow worship to touch us. On these occasions at least, our ego defenses must be down. We can permit ourselves a stillness, a receptivity, a sense of awe that may be very different from how we behave at other times. This attitude is necessary if we are to gain fuel, if our lamps are to glow in the darkness. Otherwise, we will have no fuel and no fire.

We also gain resources we need when we make time for God during the week. This can include setting aside a daily period for prayer, for silence, for thoughtful reading of the Bible and other spiritual literature, for journaling, for activities that nourish and refresh us. Our practices will vary depending on the sort of person we are. There is no single correct formula.

It can be helpful to have a room or a corner that we dedicate to our time with God. An icon or other sacred image can be a visual focus in this area. Prayer books and other resources can be kept there. By resorting to this space for solitary prayer or household prayer, we can gain daily fuel and continue to burn brightly from one Sunday to the next.

Something else that can be helpful is to have a written rule of life that details prayer practices and other habits intended to contribute to our transfiguration.

A good rule is free from unrealistic ambition, yet still challenges us. It is subject to occasional review and adaptation in response to changing circumstances. Advice on establishing a rule of life can be sought from a trusted spiritual guide, someone who knows about the fuel our lamps require.

If we are to avoid burnout, then the attitude we cultivate in public worship must permeate the rest of our life. Something of Sunday can soak through every day of the week. To avoid burnout, practice prayerfulness.

Doing this is not easy. Again and again, we fall short. But repeatedly, we are free to re-enter into prayerfulness. This present moment need not be lived as something that simply flees. Instead, we can experience it for what it truly is: time in which God is present – present to us, present with us, reaching toward us, calling us forward into life.

When we participate in the Sunday liturgy and dedicate further time to God throughout the week, we find ourselves open to life, open to flourishing through whatever our daily circumstances may be. Not only is God there with us in every moment, but more than that, God acts upon us through the unique circumstances of that moment. The Holy One is never done with us and never gives up on us.

At a church convention many years ago, buttons were distributed that read, “HAVE YOU BEEN TRANSFIGURED?” This whimsical question points us to the only sure response to the threat of burnout.

Have you been transfigured? Jesus lived in a way open to everything God intended for him. His openness caused him to be transfigured on a high mountaintop rather than burn out in the valley far below. The transfiguration of Jesus, witnessed by his inner circle of disciples, marked the transition from his active ministry to his final journey to Jerusalem.

Openness to whatever God intended for him also led Jesus to suffering throughout his life, especially during his last days that culminated in the cross. This same openness received divine endorsement when, just after his utterly real death and burial, he was raised up in a glorious transfiguration that will prevail forever. Our ascended Savior now fills all things; nothing restricts him from universal openness.

That we are human even as Jesus was human means we face comparable options, even now. Either we are transfigured, or we burn out. Our choices are welcoming God’s gift of glory or becoming mortal ashes without hope.

Our transfiguration depends on whether we open ourselves to God working on us through diverse circumstances, whether we look for God to meet us in the moment, whether we seek out God in public liturgy and domestic prayer so that we may come to recognize God’s presence with us in all things.

Our transfiguration depends on whether we cultivate the habit of prayerfulness through the very real ups and downs of every day and every week. This requires the humility to begin anew over and over again.

This transfiguration depends on whether we worship together, and do so in a generous spirit, discerning through our liturgy the One who was transfigured forever when he rose victorious from the dead.

I have spoken to you in the name of the God who makes our transfiguration possible: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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