

You Can't Unsee That!

Mark 9: 2-9

Transfiguration Sunday (last Sunday after Epiphany)

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February 15, 2015

So let me get this straight: this gospel lesson today seems to end with Jesus basically telling the disciples, “Hey guys, what happens on the mountaintop stays on the mountaintop.” Right? He tells them plainly not to tell anyone about what has happened, what they have seen, what they have experienced. He tells them, “don’t say a word until I’ve risen from the dead,” which, by the way, he just sort of sneaks in there, by the way, guys, I’m going to rise from the dead. But don’t tell anyone. What happens on the mountaintop stays on the mountaintop.

But what did happen on the mountaintop? What *did* they see, what *did* they experience? Jesus took only three of his twelve disciples with him—Peter, James and John. The inner circle, some have said, three of the four he called first. And while they were up there on the top of this high mountain, apart from the other disciples, far from the maddening crowd, Jesus is Transfigured; that is, his appearance changed before them. His clothes were suddenly cleaner, whiter and brighter than humanly possible. And there, standing with him, talking to him were the two superheroes of Israelite religion, history and culture, Moses and Elijah. Peter suggested they make it permanent—let’s build some tents or booths or something to house this glorious revelation. And if that weren’t enough, the voice of God called out to them and said, “This is my son, my beloved, Listen to him!” That’s what happened: they saw Jesus in his glory, they heard him named as God’s son, they experienced him as the fulfillment of the hope and promise of their people. They wanted it to last forever—and instead Jesus tells them, don’t say anything to anyone. What happens on the mountaintop stays on the mountaintop.

As if that were really possible. I mean, did Jesus really think that he would bring them up to that mountaintop, share this incredibly spiritual moment with them and that they wouldn't talk about it? True, on the one hand, what would they say? In what context could they adequately capture this experience in words and accurately explain it to folks who weren't there? On the other hand, how could they not be changed by such an experience. They could not unsee what they had just seen, they could not go back to picturing Jesus as the person they had experienced up to then. Jesus was transfigured, and they were transformed.

Which reminds me of a story: Brian Taylor was a mean kid, no two ways about it. He was a bully, long before that work acquired the adjective "cyber" in front of it. He was a redneck—which I realize could be taken as an offensive, pejorative word, but was actually the identifier of choice for a particular group of people in my middle school and high school. This was Southwest Florida in the late 70s and early 80s. And the self-proclaimed rednecks were the REAL Floridians. Their families had been there for generations, they were no interlopers like us who had moved down from somewhere up north. They were Southerners, with rebel flags in place of a front license plate, who knew which Lee our county had been named for. Brian Taylor was also a football player—in a state that rivaled Texas for being football crazy; he was one of the biggest kids at Colusa Middle School, by far the biggest on my bus that year.

My family had just moved to Florida during the summer before my eighth grade year, which meant that I was brand new to the town, the school, and the bus. The

fact that there were so many newcomers those years didn't seem to matter to Brian. He wasted no time tormenting the new kids on our bus—especially the ones who seemed uncertain of things like where the bus stop was, what seats were “automatically” saved, which door to use at the school, how to dress or otherwise fit in to one of the groups of Southwest Florida Middle Schoolers. I was not a football player. I was a chubby kid. Clearly not an athlete, my clothes more preppy than country, and on top of all that, I was in band. I played the clarinet, for crying out loud, which, in Brian's world, was second only to playing the flute in its tease-ability factor. He got on the bus the stop after mine, and no matter where I sat, it was wrong. He almost always made me move. Looking back now, as an adult, I can't quite remember why the bus driver stayed out of this. It was as if he, too, simply accepted the natural order of things, resigned himself to Brian being in charge on the bus, figuring as long as no one was getting hit or otherwise hurt, he just stayed out of it. I hated riding the bus, but we lived too far away to walk or ride my bike, my parents worked in the opposite direction, and as an 8th grader, I of course didn't have my license yet.

There were other things I had to get used to in a new town, in a new school, but as difficult as these were on the first few days, they got better as time went on. I knew absolutely no one on my first day of school, but I eventually made friends, in my regular classes, in band, at lunchtime, even on the bus stop. But the bus ride itself never really got better. Every morning and afternoon there was either the same old tormenting that Brian Taylor decided to send my way, or else some brand new way

that we would come up with to tease and bully me and any other new kids on our bus. It was awful. As much as I liked school, I dreaded riding the bus.

A bit later in the fall, I was able to get a paper route, delivering our five-day a week afternoon paper, the Cape Coral Breeze. I'm sure being a paper boy with the big canvas bag draped over my lime green Schwinn ten-speed wouldn't have earned me any additional cool points with Brian or anyone else, but I didn't care: it was an easy route, something fairly mindless to do between school and homework, and I was able to make a little money, too. The papers arrived at my driveway right around the time I got home, and so I folded them up and put them in little plastic bags. Then I'd head out tossing papers at front doors, getting better every day with my aim.

Part of my route was a nursing home—I suppose it was a sort of progressive care center, with everything from independent apartments to hospital-like rooms, but we just called it the nursing home. In addition to a couple of regular subscribers, I'd sometimes drop off extras, since the folks there liked to keep up with the local news.

So one day, as I parked my bike and went into the lobby of the nursing home when out of the corner of my eye who did I see but Brian Taylor. At first I wasn't sure it was him or just someone who looked like him from a distance. Sure enough, there on the table next to him was his trademark Lynyrd Skynyrd baseball cap. He was sitting at a table, playing cards with an elderly man. He was smiling a lot—much more than I was used to seeing him do, at least on the bus or in school. He was laughing and joking with the old man, if there was any sort of teasing tone it was in a completely playful way, with Brian and the older man both dishing out and taking it.

Everyone in the place seemed to know him—and once, as a nurse’s aid walked by, the old man shout out at her, “hey, meet my grandson, he comes over here every week to play cards and watch TV with me.”

I’m sure I was staring, and as cliché as it sounds, my jaw was probably hanging open.

I had never seen Brian Taylor being nice to anyone, and I would have never in a million years imagined him being nice to old people. Suddenly, it occurred to me that I wasn’t so sure I wanted him to see me there, and so I stepped back behind the counter at the nurses’ station. But I couldn’t stop staring. I couldn’t look away. I heard snippets of the conversation his grandfather was having about him with this one nurses’ aide and other residents. He was proud, nearly bragging about Brian’s football prowess, about how he was the biggest kid in his class, things like that.

Brian had that look on his face that middle schoolers do so well—that classic mid-point between pride and embarrassment. But he let his grandfather keep on going. Just then he looked up looked over in my direction. I’m not totally sure that he saw me, or recognized me, and I got out of there before I had a chance to either confirm whether he had or not. My head was spinning. **Based on what I had seen, based on what I had experienced that afternoon, I would have to re-think my whole image of Brian Taylor.** There clearly was more to him than I had ever imagined before.

To be clear, he didn’t really change his behavior much on the bus—until the next year got to high school and became a much smaller fish in a much larger pond. We never got to be friends or even friendly—this is not an ABC Afterschool Special or a Nicolas Sparks novel on the Hallmark Channel. But I could not unsee what I had

seen—the other side of Brian Taylor I had seen that day in the nursing home. It didn't make up for his bullying, but it gave me a more complete picture. It didn't bring us closer, but it did give me a more balanced point of view. And while I may have never mentioned it to him or anyone else, I could not unsee what I had seen.

The disciples had a positive image of Jesus already, but now these three had seen him in a whole new light. Jesus was transfigured, they were transformed. Once they had seen it before their very eyes, they couldn't unsee it. They couldn't go back to seeing Jesus as simply a good man, a wise teacher, a gifted healer. Even despite Jesus' strict warning to let what happens on the mountaintop stay on the mountain top, how could you look at that and not be changed? And being changed like that, how could you possibly keep it to yourself.

Once we have seen it, too, we can't unsee it.

Jesus is transfigured, we are transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.