

Building Booths

August 6, 2006

(The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ - Year B)

Luke 9: 28-36

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

In my house, we are preparing for the beginning of a new school year. And, both of my sons are enrolling as students in the Midway School District.

And, with that registration process comes many choices.

Should you sign up for band or choir?

Should you tryout for basketball or football?

Should you take Spanish or German?

And these choices are important, not only because of the courses that you will take.

But, these choices also are important because, with these decisions, you are also deciding with what social group you are wishing to be labeled.

Do you want to be a football jock, or foreign language enthusiast, or a musician?

It is as if teenaged society is saying:

“It is good for us to be here - but now let us make three dwellings:

One for the athletic kids, one for the music kids, and one for the artistic kids.”

Jesus took Peter and John and James, and went up the mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face was changed and his clothes became dazzling white.

Then, two heroes from the Old Testament, Moses, the Law-Giver and Elijah the Prophet appeared.

Peter, the big-mouthed disciple, said to Jesus:

“Master, it is good for us to be here;

Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter is not willing to just let the mystery be what it is.
Peter wants to go and put everyone in little dwellings or booths:
One booth for the Ten Commandments guy, one booth for the prophet
guy, one booth for the Messiah guy.

One of the reasons why Peter thought of putting up dwellings, or booths
for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, is that Peter was thinking of the big
Jewish festival held every year called the Festival of Booths.
At the Festival of Booths, the Jewish people gathered in late fall, at
harvest time, to bring the fruits of the field to the Temple.
And, to remember their wandering in the wilderness during the Exodus,
the Jewish people slept outside of the city of Jerusalem during the
Festival of Booths, with each family staying in their own tent or
dwelling, called booths.

When Peter was on top of the mountain with Jesus, looking at Moses,
Elijah and Jesus together,
Peter saw how good this moment of Transfiguration was.
And he remembered fondly the annual Jewish Festival of Booths,
When there would be one booth for the Smith family, one booth for the
Bradford family and one booth for the Moore family.
So, Peter tried to organize the reunion of Jesus, Moses and Elijah in a
similar fashion.
Peter could not just let the mystery be what it was.
Peter wanted to put the three holy men into categories and labels and
booths.

At the 10:00 service today, we are using incense as a part of our
worship.
We are using incense because today is August 6th, the Feast of the
Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Not only is it a holy day in the church calendar, but the smoke of the
incense rises and lifts up,
Much like Jesus lifted Peter and John and James up the high mountain of
Transfiguration.

Now, in my 3 months here as your Rector,

I have heard an entire range of opinions on the use of incense in this parish.

These opinions range from claps of joy and wonderful memories of a childhood parish filled with the aroma of incense,
All the way down to guffaws of disgust and extended eye rolling.

But, I want us to be grown ups about this.

I want us to experience the occasional use of incense in this parish as the mystery that it is, the mystery of smoke rising up to the heavens, in the same way that our prayers rise up to heaven.

I want us, on occasion, to experience the mystery that is written about in the Book of Psalms, as the psalmist sings:

“O Lord...let my prayer be...in your sight as incense.”¹

In our worship, I want us to experience the whole range of opportunities that are available to us in our Episcopal heritage.

Yet, I don't want us to be like Peter, and try to label our worship experiences, and build booths:

One booth for the high church people and one booth for the low church people.

In the old days in the Episcopal Church, before we were fighting about the stuff we fight about today,

We fought about liturgy and worship.

The fight was about high churches vs. low churches.

High church practice includes the use of incense and bells and candles, a demonstrative formality in worship, and a more Roman Catholic appearance.

Low church practice includes a more austere simplicity, an emphasis on the pulpit rather than the altar, and a more Protestant appearance.

Yet, I want you to know that your current Rector graduated from the Virginia Seminary, which has a reputation in the Episcopal Church as being a “low church seminary.”

¹ See Psalm 141: 1-2

As a matter of fact, it was only a decade ago that *candles* were even allowed on the altar in the Virginia Seminary Chapel.

So, you do not need to fear.

Under my leadership, St. Alban's will *not* become a High Church parish.

But, in this stage in my life, I am not very interested in putting people or parishes or seminaries into booths or tents or titles or labels.

And, I understand the beauty and the importance of using, from time to time, all of the wonderful worship tools we have available to us as Episcopalians.

For, I want us to experience the mystery of the God whom we encounter on the mountain top.

And, I want us to experience not only the mystery of God, but also the mystery of the *people* whom we encounter.

Resist the temptation to go and build booths or dwellings around other people.

Resist the temptation to say:

“Let us build booths here:

One booth for the marching band kids and one for the goth kids.

One booth for the Israelis and one for Hezbollah.

One booth for the high church folks, and one for the low church folks.

One booth for the liberals and one for the conservatives.

One booth for those who go to Harold Waite's after church, and one for those who go to the Country Club.”

If we stop labeling and building booths around people,

Then we will see that the people in our life seem changed and transfigured, right before our very eyes.

For, the wondrous vision of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ is not worth very much, unless we also change and transfigure how we look at other people.

For, the apostle Peter teaches me a lesson:

At the top of the mount of Transfiguration, I want to see the mystery of
other people for who they are.

At the top of the mountain, I want to see the mystery of God.

I don't want to build any more booths,
I just want to see Jesus.

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2006