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What Do You Hold Dear? – Matthew 17:1-9

Today, in the church year, is Transfiguration Sunday, a fancy way of condensing the Scripture passage we just read into two words. It's one of my favorite passages to preach, and why not? It comes around every year, and – more importantly – there's a quick, easy pay-off here: an opportunity to pick on Peter, who is such a wonderful target, since he always says just the perfect thing to talk about.

Here, the basic point for me has been that Peter – instinctively – wants to preserve the moment, this mountain-top experience, make it last forever. In a brilliant flash, literally, he understands a lot about Jesus that he had known before, but now sees: Jesus really is more than just a great teacher. The radiant light echoes the story every Jew knows of Moses meeting with God up on Mount Sinai, his face still shining with reflected glory when he comes down. And Moses is right here! Maybe this is the start of the Kingdom! And he's in at the very beginning! So, let's build a big theme park, so everyone can know the glory of God that Jesus has just introduced.

But this glorious spectacle isn't the opening ceremony for a dramatic change, God remaking the world - at least not the way Peter and the boys expect - because Jesus returns to just as he was before, just like any other person, and not only can't they share this stupendous event, Jesus swears them to secrecy as they walk back together down the mountain. Everything seems to be back to what it was once again.

Today, let's take a slightly different approach to this mysterious event. Instead of focusing on the glory of this revelation, or Peter's desire to stay in the moment, let's look at this as a precious moment in Scripture, obviously important, since it's in the Bible; obviously, an important and precious moment in the lives of the three disciples who witnessed it: but still, something only they saw, for a flash of time.

We're going to look at how it might be applied to us, today. To do that, we'll have to do some reflection. Think, for a moment, of what is most precious (what I called "dear") to you. It can be a thing, a person, a quality – even life itself. And it's okay if there's more than one; just consider what (or who) you most cherish.

Now, think how you would go about explaining to another person why these mean so much to you. How'd you do? Was that fairly easy, or not?

Good. Next, take a moment to think how you might make the case that what's important to you should be important to someone else. Make it harder: why it should be important to someone you don't even know.

Tough assignment!

So, here's today's point: we Christians have done a rotten job convincing others that what our faith brings us to hold dear, whatever that may be - a relationship with God in Christ, forgiveness, salvation, prayer, worship – just why they should be important to someone who doesn't yet care about any of them.

We, and by “we” I mean the church, generally, and in particular Valley Presbyterian Church, you and me: we need to be able to explain why our faith is important to us, and do it really, really well.

Fifty years ago, maybe, we could build a big building, call it a church, and people would stream in. Thirty-six years ago, Joe Hawkins could say we're starting a Presbyterian Church, and people flocked in, not just Presbyterians, but people of every tradition. Not necessarily because they it was precious to them; for many, it was just “what one does,” or, with Joe involved, it sounded like a lot of fun!

And people loved what they found. It became precious to them; dear to them. Many of them invested themselves heavily in it, gave of themselves, their resources, their time... Some of you remember those days, appropriately, fondly. But that just won't do it anymore.

When I did military funerals in San Diego, I'd get a call a couple of days before the ceremony, giving me the person's name, rank, and maybe a couple of details (one was Naval Aviator number 13 – pre-WWI, and his wings were solid gold). They'd also give me the name and phone number of the next of kin, and my practice was to call that person and ask if there was anything particular about the deceased that others might not know, but should. Something precious. That helped a lot in the often difficult process of saying something about someone you never met, and I got some very interesting answers.

Often, it was about some great passion of that person, something that really that really made each what they were. And, far too often, no one - outside, perhaps, a few family members or close friends, sometimes not even that - no one knew what really meant the most to them.

So, what would I say about you? What would those who know you say? Is it the thing you thought about when I asked you that first

question? Did that thing have anything to do with your walk with Jesus Christ?

At the Patio Sale a while back, we were given the contents of a house, after the family had taken what was important or useful to them. Along with the usual detritus (a fancy way of saying "stuff"), were three jewelry boxes. They'd been gone through, what was left was mostly costume jewelry.

But in one of the drawers, a drawer that had obviously been gone through, was a bunch of photos of the couple, now dead, and some love letters they'd shared. Just paper - not worth anything, except to the person who kept them, treasured them, held them and remembered what they represented. Just paper. Throw it away: it means nothing any more.

Now, let's get back to here, now, and what we're doing here.

When General Assembly Moderator Neal Presa was doing a question and answer session during the combined meeting of our presbytery and Grand Canyon Presbytery, one gentleman who was a bit older than most of us asked, "How can we get the young people in here? Our Sunday School rooms should be packed to overflowing! Don't they know what we've got?" What answer could he give, but that what we've got here doesn't matter to them. We haven't made the case that it's important.

So. Let me make a leap of faith, and say that God, Christ, your faith, or this church was one of the top things you brought to mind as precious.

For most of the people out there, beyond our walls, none of those mean anything at all. Just some old pictures and letters in a box. And Peter, James and John's experience on the mountain? Just a flash in a book.

Which brings us back to the second question, and to Peter's urgent desire: how do you convince someone else that what you hold dear is – or should be – precious, dear, to them?

And as we gather around this table, that what God offers us is for them, too?