

The Unveiling of Jesus' True Identity Readings: Luke 9:28-36 Transfiguration/C
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"And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."
(Luke 9)

Glory and light, clouds and voices, physical changes in Jesus' body and clothes, sleepy disciples who are puzzled, proposed construction projects, and the appearance of two dead prophets, all of which happened up on a mountaintop where Jesus had been praying. What are we to make of this mysterious story that is anything but ordinary? If you are mystified by this story, you are not alone. One commentator who reflected on today's gospel reading said: "If I saw Jesus and two dead guys start shining like searchlights, I would have required sedatives and a rescue helicopter." Some biblical commentators believe this story is a misplaced resurrection narrative, while others define it as an epiphany, a theophany, a revelation of the Divine. What we do know is this: The story of the transfiguration reflects a mystery which eludes our full comprehension. To be transfigured means to be changed in physical appearance or in body, something that happens out of the ordinary.

For me, the story of the transfiguration is about the full revelation of Jesus' authentic identity. He is no longer just a Jewish healer from Nazareth or a rabblerous preacher who is challenging the conventional wisdom of his day. Instead of understanding him simply as an earthly messiah whom many had hoped would save the Israelites from Roman oppression, he has been declared by God to be God's "Son." In summary, the transfigured Jesus is changed, not in essence, but in the way he is to be seen by others: a human being who is also of divine lineage.

When trying to describe Jesus' relationship to God, the early church took today's biblical witness to heart and later declared that Jesus was both human and divine. Hypostatic union is the technical term in Christian theology to describe the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in one personhood. This *hypostatic union* describes "the uni-personality of Christ, whereby in the incarnation, the Son of God was constituted a complex person with both a human and a divine nature." (Gospel Coalition) Is this definition clear? Do you now fully comprehend hypostatic union? Well if you don't, you are not alone. Many religious people have difficulty embracing both the humanity and the divinity of Christ because it doesn't make rational sense. We like to think in concrete, binary terms, meaning either/or. The concept of being both human and divine is something unfamiliar, something that goes against the conventional wisdom of the times. After all, it can be challenging to understand people who are different, who don't fit the mold of what we have determined to be "the norm."

When I think of the transfiguration of Jesus and all the confusion that this story generates, I relate it to the confusion our society is now experiencing in trying to understand the transgender community. Many folks still struggle to understand how a person who is physically born a male can identify as being female. Or how a person who is physically born a female, can later identify as male. Haven't we all been taught that a person is either male or female? Or that each baby is born with either XX chromosomes and is thus female or XY chromosomes and is thus male?

Well, at one time, before we could analyze a person's DNA, that was the case. But now with the advancement of science, things are not so black and white when it comes to gender. You can be born genetically female (XX) but one of the Xs has an SRY gene which gives you a male body. In fact, there are multiple chromosomal variations such as XX, XY, XXY, XYY. A parishioner in one of the parishes I once served was born with a chromosomal makeup of XXY. This is unusual but it does happen. That is why we can no longer classify sex as binary which means either/or. Biology is more complex than that, ever expanding with new insights that provide an explanation for those who do not fit the standard gender norms.

This was made obvious to me back in the 1970's when I served as a nurse on the adolescent ward at Children's Hospital. It was a time before DNA analysis was available. Some of those youngsters at Children's hospital had been born with mixed genitalia, having both a uterus and a penis. Some had undescended testicles but looked like a female. Had you been their parent back then, how would you have decided what gender they were meant to be? Surgically, it was easier to make someone into a female than a male back then. I wonder how many mistakes were made.

However, one of the most heartbreaking situations I experienced on that ward was a 10-year-old patient who had tied a thin rope around his penis and amputated it by jumping off a windowsill. On his chart, it specifically said: “Do not discuss this situation and surgery with the patient.” He was at the hospital undergoing plastic surgery to replace the penis he had cut off. This kind of reconstructive surgery was quite primitive 50 years ago and I wondered why they were putting the patient through such an ordeal. When I entered the room to change his dressings, I saw an innocent young boy with pleading eyes, who said absolutely nothing. After treating the surgical incisions, I returned to the front desk and asked the surgical resident the following questions: Who gave permission to do this surgery and did the boy agree to it? The surgical resident just shrugged his shoulders. I then responded: “Well, he obviously didn’t want his first penis so why are you trying to reconstruct a second one?”

Now all this happened over 50 years ago. This was a time before most of us even knew about transgender, or transitioning, or SRY genes, or not identifying with the gender with which a person was born. It was a time before we knew about the diversity of gender identification, or how a person could be physically male but chromosomally female. This was time before we knew that some bodies do not produce enough hormones for one’s genetic sex. It was a time when we thought everyone was born with either XY chromosomes or XX chromosomes. It was a time when we refused to honor people’s full identity. But now that we know better, we need to do better.

I still am mystified by the full spectrum of biological, hormonal, and chromosomal diversity just as I am mystified about the story of the transfiguration and the hypostatic union of Jesus being both human and divine. But just because I don’t fully understand something, does not mean I need to deny its existence. So this is how I have decided to proceed as a Christian in regard to the transgender community.

*I have taken a baptismal vow to “respect the dignity of every human being.” And because I believe that each person has a better understanding of who they truly are than I do, I will respect their viewpoint and strive for their human rights.

*I have come to realize that biological sex is more complicated than what I once learned in nursing school. I have not had my own chromosomes analyzed and neither have you. Although I am assuming that I am an XX, I could be wrong. I do not know about the specifics regarding the genetic makeup of the people I love. I am unaware of the hormonal levels of the people in my parish. However, in spite of my ignorance as to other people’s full identity, I will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself.

* In one survey by the Washington Post in 2023, two million adults identified as transgender, just under 1% of adults as a whole. Unfortunately, the transgender community has become an easy target for politicians to win elections, thus scapegoating one of the most vulnerable populations among us. Like the Jews of Nazi Germany, this small population is being discriminated against, being denied life-giving medical treatments. They have become victims of hate. So I will continue to advocate for health care for all of God’s people and refuse to discriminate against someone on the basis of biological sex and gender identity. I hope you will too.

* I recognize that God has created human beings in many variations, so I refuse to stuff everyone into only male or female boxes. Just because I do not fully comprehend something, does not mean I need to deny its existence. I often wonder what happened to that little boy at Children’s Hospital. I pray that he is still alive.

Remember, it was not until the transfiguration when three disciples began to understand that Jesus’ identity was more than what they had once thought. It took over three centuries of Christian thought and arguments to define Jesus as both human and divine. Let us pray that it will not take centuries for society to honor the full identity of all of God’s people.