

## Sunday, February 19, 2023 Acton Congregational Church

### Transfiguration Sunday

#### Scripture Lessons

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

**Preacher:** Rev. Ruth Richards

**Title:** On Transfiguration and a Tuxedo Cat

How are you? We ask one another, and often answer “Fine!” or “Good” or “Well, thank you” Sometimes that’s true – mostly – or we don’t have the time to say more, or more likely, we don’t feel secure enough to talk about ourselves and our concerns. Since covid we’re a little more open, perhaps.

What we definitely don’t talk about much, is mental health. Our brains get sick at least as much as our bodies, yet it is a taboo subject.

This morning, it is both Transfiguration Sunday, and the day when we have an after church opportunity to learn some more about mental health and resources available *[turned out they’d changed that!]*.

We’ve just been hearing the story of Jesus’ taking his three closest friends, Peter, James and John up Mount Tabor where, for a few seconds, they saw him glowing, radiant, transformed, glorious. Chatting with Moses and Elijah, no less, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Who knew that this was what Jesus was really like? Well, his friends, who had spent a lot of time with him and got to know him better than anyone else were perhaps gifted with this intense vision because they were ready for it – just about! Peter babbles nonsense and a few seconds later, as Moses and Elijah disappear, the reverberations from the mysterious voice of God die away, and ... Jesus tells them not to talk about it. At least, not until he has been raised from the dead. Not until they understand the larger story.

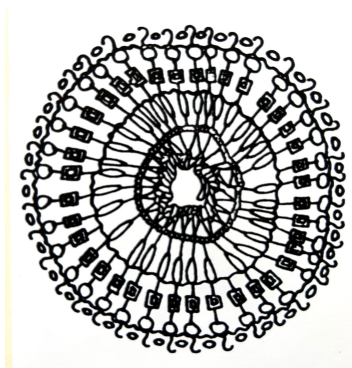
This morning I want to tell you a story that it took me a long time to receive most of the pieces that make a larger story. It’s about someone I knew towards the end of her life. She died a few years ago, before the pandemic. I shall call her Annie, although that isn’t her real name. She taught me some things about living with a long-term mental health condition.

I first met Annie when she showed up at the church I was serving as interim Associate minister. The church had a regular midweek drop-in session when the church opened its doors to anyone who wanted or needed to come in and hang out in the basement for a few minutes or a few hours There was a free lunch, it was cooked by Sarah and Cydney, who produced large quantities of sustaining and nutritious comfort food and equally large quantities of friendly chatter.

Many of the guests were rough sleepers, but certainly not all of them. Some folk came every week. Some came now and again. There was a big handwritten sign on an easel by the door listing upfront the behaviors that weren't welcome. Things like smoking, fighting, swearing, drugs – both using and dealing. Some folk didn't come because of those rules.

Some also came to church on Sunday, when they could get it together.

Annie came, I think, for somewhere that she felt safe and for the meal. She wasn't homeless, she had a little condo a short bus ride away. Annie was of indeterminate age, older than me, but not elderly. She spoke very slowly; I had to give her time to think about what she wanted to say if I tried to start a conversation. It took me a while to figure this out. It was pretty clear that she had some mental health issues going on and experienced life in a different way from, for example, me. Life was serious business for her, her face didn't show much expression, she rarely smiled and I don't think I ever saw her laugh. She seemed to feel the church was OK and also started coming to Sunday worship sometimes.



Around about this time a volunteer with some skill in art started an art program on our open house day. She'd bring in nice art supplies and teach some simple techniques, and we had a little gallery section to display completed work. Annie took to this and I noticed her working intently away at a design – it was a repeated pattern on the outside with a sort of motif in the center.

(I got Katie to put it in the bulletin, so you can see Annie's creation for yourselves).

If you look closely, the center of the design looks like a cat.

"Did you ever have a cat?" I asked [Pause]

"That's my cat" "What's your cat's name?" [Pause] "His name ... is ... Caesar"

I was to meet Caesar the cat quite soon, when Annie also started coming to our midweek evening program – sort of church family night. We'd eat the left over chop suey or whatever from the lunch, then do Bible study together. Choir practice was just before this and Annie came to that too and sang in the choir. Church was really working for her. We thanked God. She could read music, too. We thanked God some more!

She lived too far away to walk home, especially at night, so I'd often drop her off at her condo on my way home at the end of the evening. She didn't get on too well with at least one of her neighbors: "They think I'm a crazy cat lady," she once confided, so I used to go inside see her to her front door.

That's when I met Caesar, Annie's pride and joy. He was a large, handsome cat with green eyes - black with a white bib and paws - a tuxedo cat

Then one day, Annie didn't appear for our day program. This was unusual. I called her number at the condo several times but she didn't pick up. I went round there later in the afternoon. Fortunately someone let me into the building and I climbed the stairs to Annie's floor. The front door was closed, but - her keys were in the lock on the outside of the door. I knocked and called her name. I could hear Caesar the cat shouting from inside, but no other answer. The next door neighbor appeared, possibly the awkward one and said they'd not seen her for three days. I went in. Annie wasn't there. But someone had been looking after Caesar – he had plenty of water and wasn't starving when I put a handful of cat food in his bowl.

Now what? The neighbor had vanished again. I called the local police number on my cell phone and reported Annie as a missing person. A police officer arrived, checked the condo again and took my statement and description of Annie, but then he had to secure the property and take the keys. This would leave the cat stuck on the wrong side of a locked door! There was a cat carrier in the condo so the policeman and I stuffed Caesar inside and ... I took him home with me.

To cut a longer story short, some time later I got a message that Annie was in the psychiatric unit of a local hospital. Coincidentally, as a theological student I had been a student chaplain that same hospital. I fixed up to visit her. The process of getting into the double locked-door unit was very familiar. I had even been assigned to visit the patients in that exact same psych unit.

Annie knew me, but, much more importantly, she was very pleased to know that Caesar was safe and to have some photos of him. She didn't seem to have any relatives or other friends; he was the most important creature in her life.

It wasn't really possible for me to visit Annie often, but before I left the hospital I met with the leader of the Spiritual Care department, explained about her and asked if someone from his team of student chaplains could visit her regularly. He promised to do this.

It turned out that Annie was what is known as a "frequent flier" in the world of mental health. She could function pretty well as long as she took regular medication but, living alone, sometimes she would stop taking it, spiraling into a crash and a spell in the psychiatric unit to get her sorted out again. This time, as previously, Annie got a reboot, went back on her meds, returned to her condo – and was duly reunited with Caesar.

Sadly, it didn't last very long. This time I got a call from her social worker. Annie was in the hospital ER, she'd crashed again and would have to be admitted – somewhere, didn't know where yet, and please could I take Caesar, the cat? This time I had to spring Caesar from an animal shelter and sign papers of adoption. It was official. Annie was duly stabilized again but she then

transferred to a regular care facility, where she would take her meds regularly. This was official and permanent. And I'd acquired a cat.

As she was now in a less restricted place, I could send mail, which I couldn't do when she was in the psych unit, visit more easily, which I did now and again, taking photos of Caesar with me. Our conversations were rather stilted – she'd never been chatty. We sat in the common room, which she preferred to meeting in her room. She liked the art and craft program and seemed contented, and physically healthy although - she missed Caesar!

Time passed. One day I got a message from the coordinator of the Threshold Singers, a group of which I'm a member. The Threshold Singers sing specially-composed gentle, soothing songs to people who are right at the end of their life – on the threshold of death. The coordinator had a request from the manager of a care home, please could Threshold sing for one of their residents, who was close to death. That wasn't unusual, of course, it's what we do. But the care home was where Annie lived and the person at the end of their life - was Annie.

I volunteered to sing. Three of us from Threshold Singers went to sing for her the next day. She died that night.

This should be the end of this part of Annie's story that I know but it isn't. No one from Annie's family was with her at the end of her life, but her room-mate, Mary, was there. She was there for the singing. As we slipped unobtrusively into their room she was eager to explain to us that Annie could hear and understand what was said to her. If you were patient, she could still communicate a little by raising her arm to respond to questions. Mary had become very attached to Annie. Later, I went to visit with her. Almost a generation older than Annie, Mary had taken her under her wing. It was Mary who was patient and got her chatting – slowly! It was Mary who taught her some strategies for living in the home. Mary, friendly and intelligent, saw something in Annie that was hidden from everyone else and worked to bring it out. They really hit it off.

"We were a team!" She said. From what she told me, they sounded more like a couple of high schoolers at summer camp than two older ladies living out their lives in a care facility. – At least some of the time!

Annie's death was completely unexpected – she just collapsed without warning and never really regained consciousness, but her friend Mary was determined to see if it was possible for her to communicate, and figured out the arm raising thing. Annie stayed in her usual bed in the same room, they stayed together. Mary told me that not long before Annie collapsed, she started working on sorting out her possessions. She cleared out some of her things – heaven knows she didn't have much – she said she didn't need them any more. Then Mary shared something absolutely extraordinary. In what turned out to be these last days, she saw Annie come out of their shared bathroom with an amazing look on her face.

“She was radiant! That’s the only way I can describe it. Radiant! I really thought she must have seen an angel in there!” Mary was sure that her friend had a sense that her life was ending and that she had received some kind of wonderful vision from God. That was what Mary saw in her face. It helped her begin to accept the loss of her dear Annie.

I still wonder what to make of this whole story. A story of a woman, who was an artist, a musician, a friend. It’s about someone who lived with long-term mental health difficulties, it’s about Caesar the cat, her relationship with a church, and her many helpers and allies in the medical and social work system. It’s also a story about the love of God and her last real friend. If someone had told it to me I’m not sure I would believe it – but I’m not making this up, I promise. It’s not a cleverly devised myth, just a story about some people I knew for a while. And I wonder about how the fragments fitted into place so perfectly: God’s fingerprints are everywhere in the story. As I look back on it, I believe.

And I wonder most especially about Mary and Annie in their last days together. Did Annie see an angel or have an experience of God’s love that was so intense that it showed on her face shortly before she died? Were Mary’s eyes “transfigured” so she could share in it?

Mary was the person who had the time, the patience, the skills and the love to get to know who Annie was, at least at that stage of her life. Mary had lived with her and listened to her. Was she given the gift of a glimpse of her radiant, happy, transfigured, even - about to be gathered into the arms of God? For God always knew exactly who they both were: His beloved daughters.

Sometimes someone changes and you get to see it.  
And sometimes you finally see what was always there.

Maybe this is the real grace of transfiguration,  
not that things change but that our seeing does,

that we see with eyes of wonder,  
that we see divine presence in this world,

that we see resurrection in every death,  
see the gleam that is each person, even the doomed,

that we see them beyond the limits of their flesh,  
see them in company with saints, see them divine,

risen already from whatever deaths and disappointments  
they will endure, still shining. We see with eyes of mercy.

Maybe the miracle is not in the light that enters our eyes  
but the light that shines out from them.

Pray that by the grace of the God who shines  
our eyes may be transfigured.