The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
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St. John’s Episcopal Church

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During college I was part of a project called Modern Day Monastic Life. We visited a Trappist monastery, we practiced meditation and read about it, and we visited a Buddhist monastery in Cleveland. The monk there told us something I've never forgotten. He said it's better to meditate for five minutes a day then for an hour once a week. The important thing, he said, is to cultivate a habit, an ongoing practice of sitting in silence.

Last Sunday some of us from St. John's visited a Quaker Meeting nearby, where we sat together in silence for an hour, listening for God. I think some of us were disappointed that we weren't transfigured! A whole hour of silence should have delivered some great insight. But here, too, the important thing is that the Quaker friends have a practice, a habit of sitting in silence every week, every Sunday, transfiguration or no. The ongoing practice is the important part, and we can't expect to get transfigured just from going one time.

We are creatures of habit. We commute, drink coffee, watch certain TV shows on certain nights, eat certain foods at certain times-- and I have a few friends who have incorporated prayer into these daily habits.

One of them prays while she walks her dog. It's a Springer Spaniel, who is very energetic, and needs a long walk-- so she has plenty of time to be with God every morning while she walks the dog, rain or snow, sometimes watching the sun rise. She has this practice, a habit, every day.

Another friend used to hate washing the dishes until he read Thich Nhat Hanh's book The Miracle of Mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh describes how washing dishes can be an experience of being present to each moment, of feeling the warm soapy water, the movement of wiping each dish, and now my friend loves washing the dishes!

Another friend says she often finds herself stepping out of the shower with new Spirit-led insights. She says that while she's in the shower, her mind relaxes, and she's open to God's voice and to new ideas.

An 8th century Muslim mystic, Rabia of Basra, wrote one of my favorite poems. She writes:

It helps,

putting my hands on a pot, on a broom,

in a wash pail.

I

tried painting,

but it was easier to fly slicing

potatoes.

Maybe for you, it is painting that helps you fly, or maybe slicing potatoes leads you to be transfigured. All of these are ways of going up the mountain as Jesus did. He had an ongoing practice of retreating from the crowds, and literally walking up a mountain to listen for God and to pray.

The blessings of spiritual habits like these are slower than our instant-gratification culture has taught us to expect.

Transfiguration doesn't happen every day, and sometimes it's hard to tell when we are transformed. The blessings of spiritual practices are sneaky. They creep up on you unawares, they slowly slide into your life. Flora Slosson Wuellner writes about a practice called "soaking prayer," which is a prayer practice of sitting and imagining God's love pouring over you like a soft light, like a gentle rain, like a warm mist. Whatever imagery helps you rest in the love of God, not trying to do anything or make anything happen but just resting in God's abundant love and letting it soak into your skin and soak into your body. She says that people practicing this kind of prayer are often discouraged. They couldn't feel a difference. Nothing happened, they say. But over time, Wuellner says you'll feel the change. It will be a slow and surprising change.

Even Jesus could complain of not being transformed. After all, he doesn't seem to come down the mountain totally serene. In fact, he seems to be in a pretty rotten mood. The first time someone comes to him for help, he loses his patience: "Aaaaah, how long must I BEAR with you???" But, after this outburst, he does heal the man's son and reconcile the two to each other.

How can we expect more from ourselves than from Jesus? We all make mistakes. We will sometimes feel frustrated or impatient. But like Jesus, we should make it right. If we have an ongoing practice of prayer, we might find ourselves quicker to heal after losing patience, quicker to reconcile after frustration. This is the way these sneaky blessings work: you might be surprised that you have it in you to do the work of healing and reconciliation. Perhaps friends might notice before you do and comment on the change.

Actions change attitude. Ritual shapes reason. Habits form heart.

Do you want to be more generous? Then give. Giving will make you generous. Waiting will make you patient. Celebrating will make you joyful.

bell hooks, in her book All About Love, defines love as a set of behaviors and commitments, not as a feeling. No one who abuses you, she writes, is loving you. They may say "I love you," but abuse is not love. What they are describing is an attachment or a connection, not love. Loving is as loving does. Love means working for the well-being of another, it means respect, commitment, mutuality, sharing. Love does not abuse. Loving is as loving does. Acting out love will make us more loving.

So keep going up the mountain, and let your practice sneakily, secretly, slowly change you. Maybe you still lose patience, but then you find yourself healing. Let the actions do the work until your words and feelings are ready to catch up. We have rituals here that can help. Do you have trouble reconciling? Share the common cup.

Shake hands during the passing of the peace. Visit with each other after worship.

You won't be transfigured every time you go up the mountain, but your habit of going there will change you.