

Last Sunday of Epiphany – Transfiguration
Andrew Mertz '22

Episcopal Church at Yale
February 14, 2021

Blind Leading Blind

2 Kings 2: 1-12; 2 Cor 4: 3-6; Mark 9: 2-9

Refection:

Entering today's service, I want to ask why you are here. Not disdainfully, because I am overjoyed that you all decided to show up, but I want you to think about what brings you to church. If your first thought is something along the lines of "habit", "routine", or "it's Ash Wednesday", I want you to dig deeper, and find your true intention.

Sermon:

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners,
As the beloved of God to God's beloved,
As one called to bear witness, to those called to bear witness. Amen.

This coming June will mark four years since my high school classmate, Stefan, passed away in his dorm room the day following our final exam of Junior Year. His death was a tragedy, and rocked our school community. He was an incredibly talented athlete, coder, and even ventriloquist, and had a loving family and countless friends.

I was more of an acquaintance to Stefan, and while I was struck with immense grief, a few of my classmates were absolutely devastated. It didn't feel real. The days following were filled with events: a remembrance service, a gathering in someone's basement to share stories and tears, but one event in particular, the first one actually, still sticks with me: the viewing.

A bit of background about me: I was raised Episcopalian, and have been going to church my entire life, albeit reluctantly for a majority of the time. Those around me knew I attended regularly, and I included all my activities and works of service prominently on my college application, and in that way, church felt like a means to an end.

The viewing ceremony took place in the church that I attended at the time, which I was expecting to give some feeling of comfort. That day, I entered the nave with a few others, and approached the short line up to the casket. Time ground to a halt as I finally arrived, looking down at Stefan's jet black hair and skin that was tan but also somehow pale, dressed neatly in a navy blue suit.

It felt like I was stumbling off to the left, toward where a few of my classmates were gathered, some weeping, and others trying to comfort them while fighting back tears of their own.

I found a pew, and sat down, closing my eyes and bowing my head, aware that it looked like I would be deep in prayer, but in reality trying to gather myself. I rarely, if ever, prayed about anything, and when something so obvious and pressing presented itself, and I needed to talk to God, I didn't know how.

My friend Lily wandered over to me, with eyes that were red and puffy, and apologized for bothering me, but asked me to pray for Stefan on her behalf, since she did not know how. And so, like the blind leading the blind, I took her hands and closed my eyes, feeling like a fraudulent palm reader. And that is where my mind traveled reading today's Gospel.

Today we heard portions of Jesus's famous "Sermon on the Mount," in which Jesus systematically identifies and disavows using common acts of piety to impress onlookers, showing off one's devotion to garner awe and praise. The idea itself is not too complicated; the reward for your acts of righteousness either comes from those around you, or from God. The best example of this, according to Jesus, is the hypocrites in the public streets, who are doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons. They require an audience, and external validation, for their "righteous" actions.

And this all makes sense, and few will argue with the message. Nothing about this reading made me feel uncomfortable, until earlier this week, when Maria, our fabulous intern, asked for my headshot to post on Instagram and Facebook and our Eblast, for ECY's classic, trademarked "Preacher Hype" section. There just was something hypocritical about my eagerness to send in my photo, so I could share on my social media accounts the Zoom link to me preaching about following God covertly, away from the public gaze.

But Jesus is not advocating for his followers to hide their devotion behind closed doors. If he did, our instructions would be much easier, but Jesus instead wants us to check the intentions behind our actions. This issue turns from quite black and white, to very much grey.

The survival of today's church depends on a certain amount of publicity, especially with the "growing secularization of the Yale student population," which has become Brandon, Kai, and my favorite phrase. Evangelism is paramount to our future, and as followers of Christ, we are supposed to love the good news so much that we are unable to keep it to ourselves. I don't know about everyone here, but I think I would appreciate a few more Preacher Hype posts in my Instagram feed than the content that usually appears. And to that point, our work and devotion as followers of Christ should act as a light in a world that increasingly lacks and needs it. And again, that all seems to make sense as well.

But when you came here today, are you happy with yourself that you showed up? On a regular Sunday, I am. Does being here bring you a sense of comfort and relaxation, an escape from a life that none of us could imagine a year ago? It does for me.

At the same time, have you forced yourself to be uncomfortable today as well? Did the words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians read today, in which Paul describes the innumerable hardships and existing on the margins of society, make you think about the ways you show

devotion? Is the intention of your attendance to reap the benefits, tangible or abstract, of church, or do you open your heart and mind to what God is trying to instill in you?

The loss of Stefan, who was taken from us way too soon, can seem like an inexplicable tragedy, and I am sure all of you have had those moments in your lives, where sorrow is plentiful and answers are scarce. It's in those moments where the search for answers leads to self-examination. May we take this time on Ash Wednesday, surrounded by injustice, tribulations, and death, to reflect on our intentions, and our relationship with God our Father.