

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

February 2015

Dear Friends,

At the end of the Season of Epiphany, the Sunday before Lent, the lectionary always has the story of the Transfiguration. It's a pivotal story in the church year, and more importantly, in the gospels. What happens that makes it so?

I have come to see the Transfiguration as carrying three meanings, with interrelated messages.

- First, there is **a change in perception**. Jesus doesn't change, but the disciples suddenly see him differently. No longer simply a political leader or very compelling, charismatic person, Jesus is now seen as the one who will bring salvation, who will complete God's work of redemption.
- Second, there is **a glimpse of glory**. As Jesus starts his journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and death, he shows his disciples a vision of what lies beyond the harsh realities of daily human life, beyond suffering and death. This was God's way of giving them strength for the difficult journey ahead.
- Third, **Jesus' story becomes connected to the larger story of human redemption**. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, and then they are gone. In this moment, Jesus' disciples are reminded of the larger story of God's movement in history to liberate the oppressed and provide them with the resources to be a blessing to the entire world.

The disciples don't understand. They remain confused and afraid. We might be tempted to criticize the disciples for being dimwitted. But we should also recognize that this is our story too. We are not always as tuned into God's work in the world as we would like to think we are.

Mark underscores the point by placing the Transfiguration story in a section bracketed by two stories of blind persons becoming healed (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). As Jonathan Swift put it, "There are none so blind as those who will not see." Mark hopes not only that the disciples will see and understand, but his readers as well. That would be you and I.

Have you ever experienced transfiguration in terms of a change in perception? Has someone you know, perhaps someone you have known well for a long time—perhaps your spouse, or even your own child, or maybe your brother or sister—done or said something that suddenly makes that person's face change appreciably before your eyes? It's not that the person herself has changed, but suddenly you see her in a new light. Your understanding of who she is, of what makes her tick, is altered in significant ways. Depth is added, the lines in her face convey new dimensions of character. There is more to understand and appreciate about this person than you had previously realized.

I think about this in terms of the Church. There are significant changes happening in congregations – of course not in all, but in a significant number. These changing congregations are like leaven, "like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all the dough had risen" (Luke 13.21). But these transformations in certain congregations are not often recognized, much less celebrated. Transfiguration has yet to happen.

Not long ago I had a conversation with Rev. Byron Bland, SFTS 2013 Distinguished Alumnus, about the nature of the change in congregational life happening in various places. Byron has served the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the

community, and the world as a pastor, campus minister, hunger and peace advocate, writer, Stanford University lecturer, international conflict resolution expert, and college chaplain. For him, there is one overarching shift that captures its essence—from “going to church” to “creating Church among us”.

In the congregation where he worships they call it Early Church, meaning both early in the morning and early as in the 1st century. Each Sunday morning they gather to create Church. It’s not a production. It’s not a meeting. It’s not an event. It’s a life-affirming, life-changing experience—one that deepens trust in God and in life, one that moves them emotionally and spiritually, empowering them to live out a life in Christ. It has room for pain, for sorrow, for grief, for confusion and worry, but also for laughter, for joy, for consolation, for healing, for resolve and hope and fresh commitment.

In the context of song, silence, prayer, reading and conversation they are at worship. They talk together, hear one another, and listen for God’s Word to them. They lift up their despair, their hurts, their anger, their suffering, and they look together for moments of grace and healing to uplift and encourage one another. They pray for one another, surprising, supporting, and inspiring one another with the discovery of God’s redeeming and transforming love. They see each other as gifts of grace and children of God. In short, they practice agape together so that they can be doers of agape in their communities and the larger world.

Here is both transformation and transfiguration embodied in a gathered community.

I think about this in terms of SFTS – and more generally in terms of what is happening in theological education. Seminaries are changing, including SFTS, and so is theological education. It’s a paradigm shift really. Not a tiny adjustment but a big transformation, with potentially huge implications. I tried to describe this change in my December *Audemus* letter.

Theological education is transforming itself, but often the perceptions have not caught up with the changing reality. Transformation is happening but the transfiguration is yet to come. The recognition that seminaries are different places now than they were 10 years ago has not yet transpired in many quarters, including the Church itself. If you haven’t been on the SFTS campus lately, you might not recognize it now—not just the new buildings but the diverse nature of the community and the educational experience itself.

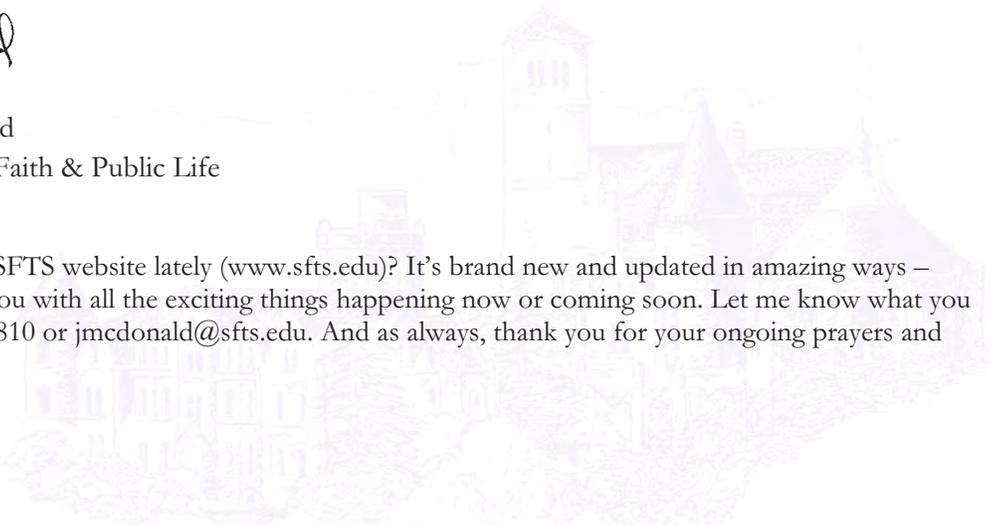
God is at work in our seminaries, including SFTS. We are not stuck on the shoals of the past. Our sails have been caught by the winds of the Holy Spirit and we are moving. Those who have eyes to see let them see.

Grace and peace,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald
President and Professor of Faith & Public Life

P.S. – Have you been to the SFTS website lately (www.sfts.edu)? It’s brand new and updated in amazing ways – designed to draw you in and engage you with all the exciting things happening now or coming soon. Let me know what you think. You can reach me at 415.451.2810 or jmcdonald@sfts.edu. And as always, thank you for your ongoing prayers and support!



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