

## **“Church Is Not a Tupperware Party”**

Luke 9:28-36; 2 Corinthians 3:17—4:1, 5-7, 16-18 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our minds might be opened to the mystery and glory of your presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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There are only two similarities I can think of between church and a Tupperware party. They are both something you might invite someone to, and they both might be something you do with friends. But honestly, these are similarities they share with a giant pile of other sorts of things, so I don't think they prove much.

On the other hand, there are some differences between church and a Tupperware party that are very important. For one, church is not a commodity. You invite your friends to a Tupperware party hoping they will buy something. Someone is hoping to sell something. That is not what is supposed to be going on at church, though there are a lot of folks out there who seem to think that's what we're all about, based on the commodification of faith they see being perpetrated in many corners. Secondly and more specifically, church is also not supposed to be about bringing more plastic into the world, to eventually take up residence in landfills, or at least someone's storage unit. Christians are called to be stewards of God's creation, so generating more plastic would seem to be the opposite of our goals.

And finally – and this is where we're beginning to get to the point and you might begin to understand why I'm talking about Tupperware at all – church is not

supposed to be about containers. Tupperware, well, it is containers. That's Tupperware's whole deal. But the church, much as we often behave to the contrary, is not supposed to be about containers. And we've been struggling with that for centuries, because we humans really, really like containers.

Peter, of course, was the first to express this contrary-to-the-gospel desire. He and John and James had the incredible honor of accompanying Jesus up the mountain for prayer. And they witnessed this incredible vision, with Jesus shining bright as sunlit snow. And Peter's first impulse is to contain it all. "This is so amazing! Let's build little houses for each of you! One for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah!"

It becomes obvious immediately, of course, just how inappropriate this response was. The terrifying cloud that then appears doesn't even bother to respond to Peter's enthusiastic suggestion; the voice merely reclaims Jesus again as the Chosen Son and says, "Listen to him!" Even the gospel writer can't help but insert some commentary, with that brief "not knowing what he said" aside. The Transfiguration, as this moment has come to be called, was not something to be preserved and kept safe in a shrine. It was a momentary vision, a fleeting glimpse of Jesus' prayer life. It neither needed nor would abide a container. This was no Tupperware party.

But despite how obvious it was that even Peter's reverent, grateful, amazed attempt to contain Jesus was a terrible idea, the church has persisted in its love affair with containers for centuries. It's not that structure is bad. We're humans; we need a

certain amount of structure to function most fruitfully. But far too often, we've confused the structures and containers that enable our ministries with the ministry itself. We've gotten so concerned with the proper formulas and titles and procedures that we forgot the point of it all: sharing God's love. We forget that all our structures and containers and traditions are but clay jars – fragile, clunky, and temporary. We forget to focus on the treasure that is within, the “extraordinary power” that can only come from God.

And let's be honest, it's not always just a matter of forgetting. We have an irrepressible need to have things under control, and despite our better judgment, this often extends to our faith. We want it to fit neatly into the shiny Sunday morning box we have for it, to be there when we need it, and not to bother us the rest of the time. It makes me think of that song from the musical *Oliver*, which I used to sing at auditions when I was young. “Who will buy this wonderful morning? Such a sky you never did see! Who will tie it up with a ribbon and put it in a box for me? So I can see it at my leisure, whenever things go wrong, and I would keep it as a treasure, to last my whole life long!”

But can you imagine God tied up in a box with a ribbon? Held as a possession, kept safe for emergencies? This is **THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE** we're talking about here. That is simply not how God rolls. We will inevitably end up as embarrassed as Peter if we let these impulses to contain God get the better of us. The history of faith is humanity learning to trust that which we cannot control, despite our

desire to tie it down with ribbons and contain it. Even the prettiest ribbons will not induce the Holy Spirit to keep still. That's simply not how it works, and the sooner we accept that, the easier it is to follow Jesus.

I remember a very anxious conference call when I was serving on the Board of DHM. This was around the time that DHM was making the shift from being called the Division of Homeland Ministries to being called Disciples Home Missions. There was so much attachment to the container that even though it was clear a more compelling name was needed, we simply couldn't bring ourselves to change the acronym too! But this particular phone call was past that moment, in the midst of a discernment process that was motivated by major decreases in funding and aimed at trying to see if there were more efficient ways to structure the ministries of the General Church. What you need to know about DHM to understand what was happening is that DHM houses a wide swath of ministries, from the Search & Call office that helps pastors and congregations find each other, to support for Chaplains, to Disciples Women's and Men's Ministries, to Refugee & Immigration Services, and much more. Many vital ministries without which the church would not be as faithful as it could be. But what was so fascinating to me was the amount of anxious desire to maintain the current structure, as opposed to ensuring the actual ministries themselves could thrive. People had grown more attached to the container than what it contained. Their fear of losing the container was keeping them from finding better ways to support the ministries the container was supposed to make possible.

In theory, as we approach our third Lent of the pandemic, we might have learned to be less attached to our containers. So much of the structure we would have considered necessary has been taken from us. We have been forced to adapt in ways we'd never imagined. In the next few weeks, we will be talking about how this experience has been like wandering in the wilderness, with most of what we thought we needed stripped away. But as Paul said, what we could see was temporary, not as vital as we imagined. What we still have is what we could not see, what is eternal and could not be taken from us, even by a pandemic – the love of God that binds us together. Our clay jar got broken into pieces, but the treasure inside remains and was never threatened.

As we worship today, the people of Ukraine are not far from our hearts. We can only imagine the pain they are going through as everything they had is taken from them. Those who are fleeing the war zones are leaving behind homes, heirlooms, livelihoods, communities, land that seemed to define them. They are taking only what they can carry, and all the unseen things that truly make up who they are. It's hard to imagine how difficult it must be to retain your sense of identity once all of that is stripped away. But somewhere, deep down, we know that it's what's inside us, what's inside the containers of our lives and our bodies that is most important. We can pray that they can hold onto that, and find hope in knowing not all is lost.

Peter had the sense that there would be moments when he was really going to want to go back to that moment on the mountain. He wanted to preserve it, so that it

could be a resource for later, when things weren't as shiny and miraculous-feeling. We can certainly understand that, for we have those times too. But those memories don't need the kind of containers you build or even the kind you buy at a Tupperware party. They are held in our hearts, unseen but carrying the power of the Eternal. They are not ours to own or control, for the Spirit flies where it will, sharing its blessings liberally over all the earth. Lest we are tempted to forget that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us, occasionally our clay jars are broken open. God will not be contained. Hallelujah and Amen!