

“Transfigured masculinity”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 17:1-9

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

What does it mean to be a man? Is it the swagger of John Wayne, or the acumen of Steve Jobs? Is it written on the battlefield, or the canvas, or the suture of a wound? So much literature, war, romance, and (oh) mid-life crises, trying to answer this one question. So I put it to the wisest person I know: Jenna, my wife. I asked her, “How would you define what it means to be a man?” I knew immediately that I had made a mistake. It’s hard to describe the look that came over her face, but I suspect it’s what a hunter must look like when his prey enters his sights.

Jenna pulled out her phone and showed me a video. In it, two boys stand on either side of a trash can, the kind with the lever at the bottom, which when pushed with the foot pops up the lid. The boys are giggling with glee. One of them slams his foot on the lever; the other’s head rolls back as he is bashed in the face with the lid. The first boy then shouts, “Now me, now me!” as he runs to the other side so that his face too can be bashed by the lid. The boys laugh and laugh as they take turns, getting hit in the face.

Jenna turned to me and said, “That’s what it means to be a man.” As she seemed to be implying some kind of idiocy, I quickly challenged her: “Yes, but there’s someone filming this.” She said, “Yes, the dad.”

We’re talking about men today, because our boys, our men, they’re in trouble. I’m not talking about the loss of brain cells due to trash can lids, though that may indeed be a crisis worth talking about. They’re in trouble because they don’t know who they are. They’ve been told all their lives—by movies and songs, ads and billboards, by their families and politics, even by sermons—that to be a man is to be tough, stoic, independent. It’s to fight your way to success, to achievement. Masculinity is power, strength, domination.

It’s a very lonely depiction, isn’t it? So much of life—not just other people, but the interior life of men, their feelings, their hopes, their hurts—is cut away. Boys are asked to separate too early from their families, their mothers. Many fathers are absent, if not physically, then emotionally. Men have fewer friends, fewer support systems, high rates of depression. Many haven’t been given the tools to understand and cope with their emotions, or the pressures to be the “modern” feeling-sharing man, so those feelings get buried beneath “I’m fine.” All because of a code that says, “Real boys don’t cry.” And if they don’t cry, they don’t rejoice either. They don’t smile. They don’t cuddle. They don’t hold hands. They don’t live. They do get angry. They do stand silent. They do use others. They do hit. They do burn down the world.

According to the FBI, more than 80 percent of violent crime is perpetrated by men, almost 90 percent of murders. Men are more likely to go to prison, to commit suicide, to shoot up a church.

They're also, in everything except sexual assault and domestic violence, more likely to be the victim of a crime.

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, every minute of every day, 24 people are victims of violence by an intimate partner in the United States. That's more than 12 million people every year. Some of them—I know—are right here. The majority of these victims are women; the majority of the perpetrators are men. Men are also victimized, and their underreporting underscores the toxic masculinity that keeps men from being open about the abuse they're experiencing. Still, women are far more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of abuse, including sexual violence. They are more likely to sustain injury or death. They are more likely to be cut off from resources and power that could help them escape.

Somehow, we've twisted masculinity into fear.

I think this must have been on Jesus' mind as he climbed that mountain, where he would be transfigured. He climbed it with other men, with whom he just days earlier was discussing how he too would be a victim of a violent crime—how men will torture him, will mock him, will nail him to a cross, because they feel threatened by his power, and feel a need to reassert their own.

Matthew says that Jesus talked with Moses, who also climbed a mountain where he heard the voice of God and received the Law. Moses came down to find the people hiding, afraid, pleading God not to show God's self. For surely if they were to look upon God, or hear God's voice, they would die. They saw in God's identity a power to be feared, a power that wielded violence.

When Jesus is transfigured and God speaks, the disciples react with the same fear. They fall to the ground, trembling. But it's what happens next that's so important.

Jesus gently kneels at their side, touches their shoulders, and asks them not to be afraid, but to rise and look. Rise and look upon a God who has come not in violence, but in love, as God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." Oh how many have longed for those words from their own father, or from God.

In the place of the distant, all-powerful, fearful God (much like the distant, all-powerful, fearful father or husband), we are revealed a God who is intimately bound up with us, gracious, still strong but whose strength is manifest in vulnerability and sacrifice. God says to listen to Jesus, who in the very verses before this passage has taught that power is found, not in using or defeating others, but in relationship, in all the little acts of quiet service, in the love we give, and the love we receive, in the crosses we carry for others, and for God.

And what if, in that moment, not only is our understanding of God transfigured, but also humanity itself? What if Jesus reveals and makes possible an entirely new form of humanity—an entirely new form of masculinity? The very first thing Jesus does after coming down that mountain is cure a boy with a violent demon. Maybe it's not just one boy, but all boys, and all their demons, that Jesus cures that day.

Jesus' transfiguration invites us to reimagine identity, power, relationships, including masculinity. Jesus displays great power on that mountain; he shines. And yet his strength is shown to be one of connection. Unlike Moses, unlike so many men, Jesus does not go to that mountain alone; he takes his friends; he has this remarkably intimate moment with them. He vulnerably shows them his true self, his everything. He will be a strong, defiant, outspoken, protective, salt-of-the-earth carpenter. The kind of hero every man wants to be. But his heroism will be found in children playing in his lap, in open expressions of grief, in acts of humility and joy, in placing his body between a woman and the stones the men of the world would throw at her.

What would a transfigured masculinity look like for us? I think it would mean men who cry, men who talk, boys who play with dolls as much as trucks, stronger male friendships, fathers who hold their children, a church that's as much for men as it is for women, equity in the workplace and relationships, a multiplicity of valid and celebrated positive expressions of masculinity (including transgender and non binary and yes, still the traditional guy too), a strength that is predicated not upon dominating and using others but on connecting to others... an end to domestic violence, an end to violence itself.

In her 2018 bestselling novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, a book about abuse and abandonment, the author Delia Owens describes an alternative vision, much like our Transfiguration today. She describes a boy, Tate Walker, walking home with his dad, who's this big guy, a fisherman, "his fists bear-sized, knuckles chapped and split." You think this is going to be your stereotypical guy, but when the boy complains about having to learn poetry in English class, his dad gives him a surprising answer. He says "that the definition of a real man is one who cries without shame, reads poetry with his heart, feels opera in his soul, and does what's necessary to defend a woman."

I'm sure his dad had heard that real boys don't cry, but maybe he also had heard that Jesus cried. He cried for his friend Lazarus when he died; he cried for the people of Jerusalem and the violence they suffered; he cried for himself, on the eve of his own death. And because he cried, he also laughed with children, and rejoiced with God, and danced at weddings, and sat with an outcast woman at a well, and washed the feet of his disciples, and ran his fingers through John's hair, John's head in his lap.

I think it's time for boys to be real again. Jesus offers to make us whole. And thank God, because when boys cry, and their identities are built on connection not subjugation... when boys are real... that's when women won't have to be afraid. Boys either. **Amen.**