

The Transfiguration 2023

Richmond Flowers was my dad's first cousin. They were in business together for a short time in the early nineteen-fifties, until Richmond decided to enter politics. Richmond was charismatic. He could tell a joke better than most anybody. He was the consummate "people person." His booming voice was legendary. His career in politics was meteoric: He was elected as a representative to the state legislature, and just a few years later, he was elected to the state senate, and then attorney general. In 1965 it was Richmond Flowers that prosecuted the deputy sheriff who murdered Jonathan Myrick Daniels in Hayneville, Alabama. Daniels was among a group of seminarian activists who were registering the Black citizens of Lowndes County to vote. His feast day is August 14th. Despite a dozen eye witnesses the deputy was acquitted by an all-white jury. But the trial led Richmond into an unexpected course in his political career that he'd not counted on. He became a strident advocate for civil rights... an advocate for civil rights in a state characterized by a deeply rooted racist history. George Wallace was the governor then, who famously, infamously, stood in the doorway of the registrar's office of the University of Alabama to prevent Black students from entering the University.

Richmond had made a fateful choice. He was rejected by the white power structure as he became a staunch opponent of George Wallace and his racist policies. In 1966 Richmond ran for governor against George Wallace's wife Lurleen... she ran because it was state law that a governor could not serve three consecutive terms, and Wallace had served

two. Richmond finished a distant second. Two years later he was convicted of extortion, allegedly taking bribes from business interests wanting to do business in Alabama. After serving a sentence of two years, he returned to Dothan a broken man... a man bearing the shame of his conviction, and perhaps to a greater degree, the derision of his hometown and his family for calling out the racism that then and now infected and infects our state. Richmond, until his death, maintained his innocence, nor did he ever renounce his advocacy for civil rights. I've only seen my father cry twice... once when his father died, and then again when Richmond was convicted and sent to prison.

He was first sent to a prison in Texarkana, a high security facility with deplorable conditions. Later, with the help of Senator John Sparkman, he was transferred to the Federal Correctional facility at Maxwell Airforce base in Montgomery. One Sunday afternoon my parents went to visit him. They'd not seen Richmond since his conviction. They were nervous about what they might encounter, his state of mind, his health, his brokenness. They sat in the drab waiting room for what seemed like hours, until at last they were called back to the visitation gallery. At first my mother didn't recognize him. He was glowing. His face shining like the sun, she said. Was it her imagination, or did he look years younger? His voice was smooth and calm. There was no anger in him. An improbable peace. He was so much himself, she said. Upon her return home, my mother, as only she would discern, told us that what she had witnessed was a "transfiguration;" that Richmond was dazzling with light.

Today is the Feast of the Transfiguration. It normally occurs on a weekday, but it falls this year on this Sunday, so we just heard read Luke's account of the three disciples' encounter with Jesus on the mountain. Luke, of course, is being typological. He evokes the figures of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus because he wants us to understand that Jesus is one in the venerable line of the prophets; that he is the new manifestation of the tradition, that he is deeply rooted in the biblical history of the people of Israel. And unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke tells us that Jesus and Moses and Elijah are speaking of his "departure." The word for departure in the Greek is Exodus... thereby evoking the memory in his audience of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. So quite cleverly Luke wants us to understand that the Law and the Prophets, the way of God, is all about freedom; all about the release from whatever it is that hinders us from living into our true calling, our true humanity. Just as Moses glowed with light at his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai, Jesus is aglow with the same light... which is the very light of God manifest in flesh and blood. And we, brothers and sisters, we too, stand on that mountain. This is our story.

Jesus, as you've heard me say time and again... Jesus is the archetype, the model of our true humanity. A mythological, legendary, literary figure. He is living into his truth, like Shakespeare's Prospero. He has made a fateful choice. He has chosen advocacy for the poor and the disenfranchised, and the socially rejected, and he has taken on and chided the powers that be in the process. I'm imagining that Jesus's ministry felt like freedom to him...

and such freedom, Luke tells us, glows with the light of God, the light of truth and beauty... and such light is from the source immemorial. It is the light, the energy that creates all things. It is, in short, the light of Love.

Perhaps, for the disciples the light was felt more than seen. Perhaps it is that God is more felt than understood. That our quest is not so much for the knowledge of God, but for the mystery of God. When all of our reasonableness fails us; when our calculations and best laid plans are revealed as folly; when empirical data reaches its limit, then it is the eye and the voice of the imagination, felt more than seen or heard, that lights our way. It is the imagination, the mythic vision we share with God, that knows deep down our true calling. The teachings of Jesus offer us the means by which to claim that calling, our true humanity. Luke is presenting us with an image of the church, a church undistracted by its institutional trappings, a church dazzling with the light of compassion, empathy, justice... and perhaps most of all, praise... and such virtues are formed in and by community. Our discernment, our recognition of the true, depends on each other. I have heard it said that "I can be a Christian on my own." But that I believe is not true. We need the critical mass of community to enkindle the fires of the imagination. The light is stronger when we are together.

Richmond Flowers gave himself over to the faith of a broken people, our Black brothers and sisters... people who believed in dignity, well-being, and justice for all, particularly for those who had been left out of the dignity, well-being, and justice of God's

abundant life, people who had and have been scorned for only the color of their skin. I want to believe that even though incarcerated, even though he wore the garb of a prison, he knew the freedom of his true calling... the very peace of God that passes understanding. An irony to be sure.... And costly. Our choosing our heart's desire comes at a cost. But what cost freedom? What cost to be fully alive? I believe that is what my mother saw, so many years ago. A vision of the one life... and Love.

Richmond was pardoned by President Jimmy Carter in 1978. He was then able to practice law again: small estates and trusts, some work his brother sent along to him. He led a simple and mildly productive life. Mostly he regaled his cronies with old stories at the coffee shop. He died just a few years ago. The local paper printed a short and unremarkable obituary. A meagre notation of a life. Indeed, "a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and in his own family." But a week or two later the Birmingham News, the New York Times, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution printed detailed accounts of his life, his taking on George Wallace, his prosecutions of the Ku Klux Klan, his quest for justice, his solitary voice against the racist status quo at a time no white person would take on such a mantle. So, even at his death he is glowing with the light of God, the light of his heart's desire, and so shall we, good people. Follow your calling. Be who you are created to be, and shine like the sun. Remove the veil. Your exodus into freedom awaits. Be the light in a dark world, and know the freedom of eternal life, not in some distant future, but for today... for now.