

“Unveiled” GPPC 3-2-19
Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Back in the mid-1980s, I became a member of a small Presbyterian church in Brooklyn, New York. The church building was gorgeous—old, gray stone outside, rich, dark brown wood inside, and large stained glass windows--one of them actually a Tiffany stained glass window. Heaven knows how much it was worth.

The choir included several paid soloists who also held prominent musical positions in New York City. I think the alto sang with the New York City Opera touring company, but I may be exaggerating through the fog of nostalgia.

The church’s pastors were husband and wife. The husband had been a pastor for decades. His wife had been a pastor for just a few years. The two made a strong team. One was a better preacher than the other and one was better at pastoral care than the other. They both taught Sunday school classes and led what they called “Koinonia groups,” basically small group, Bible study/sharing/fellowship groups that met in various homes in the evenings, as we’ve done here as well.

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Over time I became more and more involved in the congregation. It was a community in which I experienced God's unconditional love. The pastors' sermons comforted me, challenged me, and made me think. And I was one of those church nerds who would sit there and take notes on my bulletin. Oh, wait, that's what some of you do too.

During one of the koinonia group meetings, I was surprised to learn that the pastors did not view homosexuality as sinful. Now I had had a number of gay friends over the years. I had fought against discrimination against them. But I had also read the Bible and I knew what I had been taught growing up. Same-sex relationships were sinful, period. Right?

But the pastors explained that the few passages about the subject in the Bible were really focused on abusive relationships, or cleanliness laws, and not on loving, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Further, science was teaching us that rather than simply choosing our sexual orientation we actually discover our sexual orientation. So being gay or lesbian was not a sin. These views were surprising to me, but after thinking about it, praying about it, and doing

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some reading, eventually my mind was changed. And I've spent more than 30 years speaking out in favor of sexual equality.

Like me, and like our Presbyterian denomination, maybe *your* mind has changed on this issue. We have become a denomination and a congregation that does not merely tolerate LGBTQ folks but celebrates and affirms them. And like me, maybe this week you've been praying for our United Methodist Church brothers and sisters who have been struggling with how to respond faithfully to LGBTQ people. But sadly, that denomination, by majority vote, has chosen not to embrace full welcome and inclusion. For most of my United Methodist clergy and laity friends, this is a devastating decision. But God is still at work, and we shall see what God comes up with next.

Have you ever had something new presented to you that was hard for you to accept at first? Maybe it was complicated and difficult to understand. Or maybe it was something quite different from what you had been taught and were used to.

The Apostle Paul uses a strange image to say that the people of Israel are dealing with something new that they're having difficulty

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accepting. He points to the story of Moses and Israel. You remember Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets with the Ten Commandments on them. Moses' face was shining. And this happened not just at the giving of the Ten Commandments but again and again throughout Moses' time as the human leader of Israel whenever Moses would go and speak with God in the tabernacle. We don't know exactly what his shining face looked like, but as one scholar says, "[Moses] represents the radiance of God to the people. And he represents the people as being 'in the image of God.'" (J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 263.)

This sounds awesome and encouraging, right? Except Moses with his shining face was scary, so scary that Aaron and the other Israelites were afraid to come near him. So Moses would put a veil on his face. But he would take the veil off when he went in to talk with God again. The veil seemed to serve as a kind of buffer for the people as they dealt with the radiance of God shining from the face of Moses.

It's such a strange story. And Paul has an unusual way of interpreting it. As one teacher writes, "Paul explains the veil in a different way: Moses wore it lest the people should see how after he had

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come from speaking with God the glory gradually faded from his face.”

(Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, 32.) The veil is not just a buffer from God’s radiance; it’s also a way of covering the fading glory from the face of Moses.

And then Paul makes his next theological move. He says this is all like the veil that lies over the mind of Israel. That is the people are still focused on keeping the law as the path to right relationship with God—fading glory.

Instead, says Paul, when one turns to the Lord, “the veil is removed” and we see that our right relationship with God comes not through obedience to the law but through God’s grace in Jesus Christ. So, says a commentator, “The transfigured face of Moses pales beside the transfigured Christ.” (Carl R. Holladay in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 185.)

Now Paul is not saying that the law itself is a bad thing. We need direction in life to keep us from destroying ourselves and others, and to live in healthy ways. But if we rely on obedience to the law as a way of having right relationship with God, then we’re in trouble. Because

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needing to obey the law makes us frightened and frantic that we have not been obedient enough and we have to fix our mistakes and we have to do more to please God—right now and it better be good.

Or it makes us arrogant, because we think we've been so good that we've earned God's love and God owes us something. "Of course you love me, Lord, because I am so virtuous. I am so much better than those other people, those nasty sinners. Now, I have this list of things you need to do for me, because I am so special, you see."

Well, Paul is not a fan of this theology that traps us in fear on one side or arrogance on the other. Instead, he sees a remarkable image, an image not of entrapment but of freedom. As Paul says, "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

Paul says Moses was impressive enough, but Christ shines in glory beyond words. And as we turn to God in Christ, we not only experience the freedom of God's grace, God's freely given gift of forgiveness and

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love but we are actually transformed. As Paul claims, we move from one degree of glory to another.

Well, I don't know about you, but when I think about my own messy life--my mistakes, my sins, my laziness, my arrogance, my fear—my own messy life, I do not always feel that I am moving “from one degree of glory to another.” I sometimes feel I'm dog-paddling from one flood zone to another. Do you sometimes feel that way?

But here's how one person explains Paul's thinking. He says, “The true identity of the Christian is found in the love of God that has been written upon hearts. No outward circumstances or worldly appearances can change the inward and spiritual reality of God's justifying and redemptive grace.” (Robert Warden Prim in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, 451.)

So despite all our mistakes, all our failures, all our resistance, there is more going on in our lives than meets the eye. Despite all appearances to the contrary, underneath it all, unveiled, is the power of God working in our lives moving us from glory to glory.

It's amazing, isn't it? We should look at each other differently. You're not merely the person I agree with or disagree with most of the

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time. You're someone God is working on underneath the surface moving from glory to glory. You're radiant, radiant with the love of Christ.

And that's why Paul says "we have such a hope, we act with great boldness." And he says, "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

As we live in a world that often seems uninterested in the church, dismissive of "the institutional church." Ready to toss aside "organized religion," not realizing, of course, they we're really not all that organized. Church, ministry--it's all a bunch of hooey. Just go play in the park or have some brunch or watch TV. Right?

Wrong, says Paul. We have such a hope. We act with great boldness. So, as Jesus and the prophets teach us, we take stands for what we believe is right. Standing up for people whose rights are trampled. Standing up to protect this planet entrusted to us for a time. Standing up to share the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. We act with great boldness.

And we do not lose heart, because something greater than what we see, something veiled, ready to be unveiled, is happening.

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Another pastor says, "...our call is to keep talking of God, pointing to Jesus Christ with humble lives of service, and trusting the rest to the Spirit. Every once in a while we are encouraged. Several years ago, an ornery civil rights attorney, known to make East Texas county sheriffs sweat with fear, heard my name in conversation and said, 'That preacher scares me and his church scares me.' The other person said, 'Scared? You? Why?' 'Because they remind me of God,' he said.

About three or four years later he promised his dying father that he would return to church, and he hasn't missed a Sunday since, sitting with his wife on the second row. One day, while eating lunch with a group of attorneys, he said something uncommonly gentle to an overworked waitress. One of the attorneys remarked, 'What's gotten into you?' He said, 'I'm a Christian now.' (Kyle Childress in *The Christian Century*, January 23, 2007.)

"I'm a Christian now." That's what he said. ©Jeff Paschal