

## Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Freedom

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2<sup>1</sup>

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC Camden, March 3, 2019

*Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and 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. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.*

A wise old man was sitting by a tree near the road to a medieval city. A traveler came along the road on his way to the city. He stopped his horse by the old man and asked, "What manner of people live in this city?" The old man queried, "What manner of people lived in the city from whence you came?" The traveler replied, "They were a horrid lot. They were cheats and misers, misfits and louts. I could ask for none worse." The old man said without hesitation, "You will find the same people here as well." The traveler thanked the man and continued on his way. A little while later, a second traveler came along the road, and he too paused by the old man. Stopping his horse, he asked, "What manner of people live in this city?" The old man queried, "What manner of people lived in the city from whence you came?" The second traveler replied, "They were lovely people, generous and kind, caring and honest. I could ask for none better." The old man smiled and said without hesitation, "You will find the same people here as well." The traveler thanked the wise man and entered the city."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Gospel text for today, Luke 9:28-36, will be the focus during the service of installation on March 17.

<sup>2</sup> I want to thank Jinx for reminding me of this story which she shared at Cabinet. It seems very fitting for the complex text we heard today from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

This story is a potent reminder for me of how much our attitude and point of view shapes our perception of reality. I think it can also teach us something about how the energy we put out tends to be the energy we get back, which was also an aspect of last week's text (Luke 6:27-38). It's striking to me that the wise man in the story does not try to actively persuade or dissuade either of the men. He simply holds up a mirror, so to speak, and says, "You will find the same people here." If I go through the world assuming that people are cheats, misers, misfits and louts, I will project that negative perception on people before I have even met them. I will probably have my perception focused on looking for stories that will confirm my prejudice. I am also more likely to be blind to or have my heart so hardened that I cannot recognize when reality is different from my perception or when I myself am acting like a lout. Drawing from the reading from Corinthians, we could say that we are always in danger of seeing the world with a veiled face. I invite us all to pay some attention to this tendency in ourselves as we go through the week.

The world has been and is a dangerous place in many ways. We know from neuroscience that our nervous system is actually evolutionarily wired to look for trouble first. It is a survival mechanism and has its use. Thankfully, our brains have continued to evolve and our frontal lobes can help us find our equilibrium. Sadly, we need at least 4-5 times as many positive impulses to undue the effects of something negative. The second man in our story can remind us of the need to pay attention to where and how people are generous, caring and honest around us. I don't mean this in a naïve pollyannaish way. This is life giving and real as well. Notice what happens when you meet people from a place that presumes the capacity for goodness in the other this week. We might even find a hint of radiance.

Paul is also working with the image of a mirror and takes all this to another level. According to Paul, God is inviting us to be gradually transformed in such a way that we see Christ's glory as reflected in a mirror in and through each other. What a wild and beautiful idea. He claims that this will bless us with real freedom. Paul is motivated to write this letter to the Corinthians because they have been losing touch with this sense of freedom and belonging. What might he

mean? While still a Pharisee, Paul believed that he was justified before God by keeping the law/commandments of God as revealed to Moses. He tried to keep all the commandments and justify himself before God. He saw the new Christian movement as a threat to this teaching and became their principal persecutor. The dramatic story of his conversion tells how the risen Christ invited Paul into a direct relationship of loving presence rather than one founded on conditional performance and promises. It appeared to Paul that some people in Corinth were promoting adherence to the law of Moses again.<sup>3</sup> For Paul that represented a step backward into a kind of life of bondage based in fear, a life lived behind a veil, separated from reality, from God, from living a free and radiant life. In our text, Paul argues that what was revealed in Moses is secondary and fleeting compared to what has become embodied in Christ. Paul draws on the story of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35) with the tablets of the covenant (ten commandments). In the actual story from Exodus, Moses is at first not aware of how his own face and appearance has been transformed after his encounter with God. The glory of God shines around and in him so much so that the people are scared. Moses puts on a veil so that people don't get overwhelmed by the glory of God shining through him.

Paul reinterprets the use of the veil for his own purposes. Paul claims that Moses wore a veil because he knew that his face would soon stop shining after he returned from the direct encounter with God to face the people (2 Corinthians 3:13). It's as though Moses was hiding the fact that the air was going out of his faith balloon so to speak. Paul further suggests that, by doing so, Moses acted without the kind of boldness Christians can claim. Our Gospel story about the transfiguration also in part serves to establish the radiance of Jesus as the Christ with Moses clearly in a supporting actor role, not as the lead of the story (Luke 9:28-36).<sup>4</sup>

We need to be careful not to get trapped in naming one religion as superior over another.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Warden Prim in *Feasting on the Word*, eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor Year C, Volume 1, (Westminster: John Knox, 2009), 449.

<sup>4</sup> Notice how Moses and another key prophet, Elijah, appear there as well and affirm Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him (Luke 9:28-36)." Jesus is portrayed as the chosen Christ and ultimate authority.

<sup>5</sup> Keeping in mind that we are visiting the Islamic Center this afternoon, we will also need to watch our own ideas

Paul's primary concern here is that followers of Christ are losing their way. He is speaking to us. Paul is trying to remind all of us that freedom comes from turning to Christ: "...but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:16-17)." Paul equates this turning toward Christ with basing our lives on mercy rather than our own accomplishments or failings (2 Corinthians 4:1). When we turn to Christ, we affirm the incarnational principle through which everything that exists comes to be because and as the outpouring of God's love. All our lives are grounded in this love but we struggle to see and trust this. The Spirit is slowly converting us as we, "with unveiled faces, [are] 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" (2 Corinthians 3:18a).

Part of this process is naming the truth about our lives rather than hiding it – which would just be another way of living as from behind a veil. As people in the recovery movement can tell us, what is hurting us and how we hurt must be named as true and faced but our transformation is not wrought by will alone.<sup>6</sup> It is the ability to surrender to a greater mercy that opens the door to a lasting kind of love of self and others that is based in the deep well of God's love. We can then be bold and do not need to lose heart because our identity is no longer rooted in our own separate selves. This is a good reminder just before we enter the season of Lent. The more we learn to let go into God's care and love by God's grace, the more Christ can shine through us to reflect Christ's love directly to others. Hopefully, others will mirror this same love for us.

I came across the story of a girl in Germany who modeled in a simple way what it means to be so open that Christ's love can radiate through us. She and her dad shared a prayer time every

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and assumptions of what it might mean to wear a veil for a Muslim sister.

<sup>6</sup> Paul names "renouncing the shameful things one hides," refusing "to practice cunning" and openly stating the "truth" as aspects of what this changed life looks like (2 Corinthians 4:2). I think we need to take care in what we mean by that. Simply renouncing what we might be ashamed of can leave us feeling even more ashamed. We may end living pretend lives. Think of how many TV Evangelist or other church leaders have pointed a finger at other people while practicing the very thing they condemn.

night before she went to bed. She would name all the people and creatures she wanted to pray for. The list kept getting longer. Then, one night, she said: "Daddy, we need to pray for Darth Vader. He needs to get some sleep and care, too." In case you don't know who that is, he is the arch Nemesis in Star Wars. Someone who lost his way in his pursuit of power and control, was severely wounded and lives his life behind a protective mask - or call it a veil. The little girl knew that there was more to him than that mask. If she could hold up a mirror to him, he just might discover a new image of himself. This girl is more like the second traveler in our story who is willing to see behind the veil. May we learn to meet each other in this way by the power of the Spirit for the sake of a greater freedom with and for each other.

All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.