

The Spirit of the Lord

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

¹² Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; ¹⁶ but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ 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.

^{4:1} Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² 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.

Where do we go and what do we do when we are questioned or challenged about our faith? How do we handle the criticism? In our scripture Paul was being challenged over his apostolic standing. It is impossible to know all the problems Paul was facing in the church at Corinth. One problem, however, seems to be that Paul's authority was being questioned by the congregation because of other teachers who were proclaiming a gospel different from Paul's preaching. This text (2 Cor. 3:12-4:2) seems to indicate that one such "new" teaching was a form of Christianity based on the laws of Moses. Paul defined himself and gave a more picture of the core of his theology. His readers are called from lives of spiritual bondage and intellectual blindness to a new freedom, hope, and boldness as a result of the transfiguring encounter with "the Spirit of the Lord" (3:17-18) that releases them from bondage and brings sight to their eyes. Hardened hearts are softened and blind eyes become sighted as the glory of God is revealed and lives are transformed (3:18) into God's image.

Paul's words remind his readers of his being struck blind on the road to Damascus and the subsequent restoration of his sight as a symbol of his personal transformation.

One writer recalled a very successful substance-abuse rehabilitation center in Daytona Beach, Florida. The center is named for two recovering alcoholics: Leon Stewart, an attorney; and Hal Marchman, a pastor. Released from the shackles of addiction, they teamed with others to witness boldly to the hope of freedom from addiction for others. Marchman became the Walter Rauschenbusch of the city, reaching out to substance abusers in the Hell's Kitchen of the community. Myriads of people became unchained and enabled to reclaim their lives because of his bold but loving intervention into their lives. With tough love and the message of a transfiguring gospel, Marchman became a catalyst for lights turning on, for shackles breaking, for habits overcome, and for lives converted (3:16).

In our own congregation Tim O'Brien as a teacher for at risk students, realized that many of his students were at risk of hunger and were benefiting from Carriage Town Ministries. It was when Ray Hopper caught the passion the Carriage Town became part of our regular mission and now we worship with them quarterly and serve in tangible ways through meals and giving donations to that work.

We often imagine the transfiguration of Jesus as something only for him or mysterious and mystical, like only for a few chosen "holy" persons on a sacred mountain far away and long ago. Paul, however, emphasizes the meeting of God and Moses, face to face—and whenever this happens to anyone that one witnesses to life-changing experiences as we encounter God through the Spirit of the Lord.

Like the Jews who could not or would not see Jesus as the Christ (3:14-15), we also may be victim to our own bondage and darkness. Paul implied some could not stand to see the glory on Moses' face, so Moses' veil was a mask that hid what is glorious and good. These persons had the law revealed in the theophany of Sinai but could not fathom ("see") its depth—who have access to truth but do not act upon it or incorporate it in their lives. Like they, many of us are "blind" or hardness of heart, having never "gotten it." Like the Corinthians, we are veiled (2 Cor. 3:14) from the transforming truth by the concerns of this world (Rom. 12:2). What are the things? Fill in the blank: "He/she was blinded by_____."

As with the Israelites in Moses' time, idolatry continues to consume people. Sensual pleasure, material lust, and absorption in nature are some of the "veils" that prevent us from hearing, seeing, and acting in gospel ways, we replace the Pauline virtues of life, love, and spiritual freedom. This is the "hardness of heart" that makes it so difficult to change our ways, right our paths, and trek the road less traveled.

Paul Tillich, in his sermon on Romans 5:20, "You Are Accepted," suggests that our personal and societal idolatries often manifest themselves in a kind of "moral reversal." Rather than seeing the state of our own sin (addictions), we project onto the external objects of our addiction. We blame the alcohol, the drugs, the temptress, the tempter, "the system," the cops, or religion. Other people—parents, spouses, friends, or children—receive the venom of our projections. Paul claims that even today, in spite of everything (3:14), the blind do not see, and even though they "know," they cannot fathom they are the problem.

The good that they would do, they cannot. And, quite the reverse, they do evil against their own judgment and will (Rom. 7:14-23). For Paul, only the

transformative and reconciling power of the Ground of Good from whom they are separated can change them.

If you have an opportunity view the youtube view the compelling video of the song "Some People Change," performed by the duo of Eddie Montgomery and Troy Gentry, to understand the powerful and transforming impact of the Spirit of the Lord. In one verse a young man, fated to hate by the racism of his family environment, was

On the road to nowhere fast,
Till the Grace of God got in the way.

Then the man "saw the Light" and became a "brand new man" (2 Cor. 5:17). The words give us a bold enactment of the gospel of love, hope, and deliverance for Transfiguration Sunday. Bondage and blindness, coupled with self-contempt and hopelessness, are overcome by the transforming power of God. (**Donald W. Musser**)

Paul wrote to remind the church of his boldness in preaching the gospel of Christ as the one who lifts the veil of death and offers the Spirit of life and freedom. Paul wanted the Corinthian church to hold fast to the permanent glory (v. 11) and to the freedom that comes in Christ (v. 17).

Paul admonishes the church at Corinth to take a look at their own life in Christ and to see in their own unveiled faces how they are being "transformed... from one degree of glory to another" (v. 18). A preacher could build a sermon around this theme of *transformation*. Paul had enough experiences in ministry with this particular church and others to know that no one falls head first into the pool of God's transforming love and emerges fully formed as a perfect reflection of Christ. The work of God's justifying and redemptive Spirit moves in human lives *from one degree of glory to another*.

This is wonderfully good news! No one sails through life without setbacks, without rough seas, without hardships and doubts. Paul is a prime example of this obvious truth. Yet for the follower of Christ, the setbacks or hardships are not the defining events of life. For the followers of Christ, the defining event is the freedom offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. 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. The work of the Christian believer, then, is to allow the love of Christ and the freedom of the Spirit to be manifest in daily living. The work of the Christian believer, with Paul, is not to lose heart but to continue to act—no matter what the circumstances of life—with boldness in the direction of God's redeeming work of love and mercy.

There is a beautiful statue on the campus of Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, entitled *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance*. The statue is of Booker T. Washington, who founded Tuskegee University in 1881, standing over a slave and lifting a veil so that the light of education can strike his face. The slave, crouched down, has a book in one hand and is using the other hand to help lift the veil. His feet are poised to stand and move forward. The slave is looking out into the world with wide-eyed hope. The caption under the statue reads: "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry."

In Christ the veil of ignorance and death is being lifted so that humanity might live in the truth of God's redeeming love and in the work of God's transforming Spirit. **(Robert Warden Prim)**

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