

Sermon 2Corinthians 3:12-4:2 February 7, 2016

So, since we have such a hope, we act with great confidence. We aren't like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the Israelites couldn't watch the end of what was fading away. But their minds were closed. Right up to the present day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. The veil is not removed because it is taken away by Christ. Even today, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. But whenever someone turns back to the Lord, the veil is removed. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Lord's Spirit is, there is freedom. All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. This is why we don't get discouraged, given that we received this ministry in the same way that we received God's mercy. Instead, we reject secrecy and shameful actions. We don't use deception, and we don't tamper with God's word. Instead, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God by the public announcement of the truth.

My mother was an amazing gardener who could grow anything. Wherever she went if she saw a flower or a plant she liked she'd take a little piece of it and it would grow for her. I remember her being at our house when David and Mimi were a baby and a toddler and I had some dried up, straggly plant in the kitchen and my mother said, "Dear, if you'd water the plants they wouldn't die" and I remember thinking that I was too tired to care about the plants, and that if they needed water they could get it for themselves. My mother gave me a hardy plant, some kind of trailing vine, and I had it for decades, and it only recently died. Everywhere I've lived I've had that plant, but it had been too small for the container it was in, and I'd put it outside thinking that I'd report it... but it froze and died. I neglected it, and it died.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday; the day the church remembers Jesus going up to the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John; where they saw Him transfigured, surrounded by dazzling light, talking with Moses and Elijah. It was a mountaintop experience for the disciples, to be given this vision of three spiritual giants, and Jesus, blazing with light.

In today's scripture lesson from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he writes about how a relationship with Christ will transfigure us, change us... into the glorious likeness of Christ. Paul believed that as that followers of Christ are called out of our old lives of bondage and darkness into a new and transforming relationship with Jesus. Paul had an encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus, where he experienced a blinding light and heard Jesus speak to him. That encounter transfigured Paul, and his mission changed from hunting and persecuting Christians to making disciples for Christ, and to teaching the church how to live lives transformed by Him. Paul wrote to the churches from his own experience about how encounters (and not just encounters because that implies mountaintop experiences but steady, sustained relationships as well) with Christ transform us, and God's glory is seen in us.

I think we have not taken this seriously enough. It's been enough for many of us to be good people, to give Christianity our best effort, instead of believing and celebrating that we are being transformed into the glorious likeness of Jesus Christ.

We are called to live boldly; not timidly or half-heartedly but with confidence that we are being changed... we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. We need to expect it in ourselves, that Christ is changing us and taking over our lives... and we need to expect it of each other.

Paul writes to the church about a veil: the veil that Moses covered himself with because when he was face-to-face with God his face shone; and the veil all humanity wears to shield us from the naked truth of who we are, and who God is. We live in bondage and in darkness to sin and self-centeredness unless we unveil ourselves and stand in the light of Christ, unless we accept His love and forgiveness. Paul, a former Jew, compared Moses to Jesus and found Moses and the Law inferior. Jesus was an observant Jew however, and He said that He came as a fulfillment of the Law. Because of Jesus we don't live under the Law as observant Jews do, but we live in the Spirit of the Law, which is to love God with everything in us, and to love the least loveable people we know with the openhearted and compassionate love of Jesus.

We are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. His glory is - inch by inch or cell by cell - taking over our former lives and changing us into His glory. This is a mountaintop proclamation and if we were Pentecostals we'd clap and shout "Hallelujah!" and "Amen!" because this is amazing! This is a miracle! But we're Methodist so we'll take it in stride... but inside, Lord, may there be butterflies of anticipation and joy in us that Your likeness is being seen, is being manifest, in us! Thank You, Jesus! I read recently that it's okay for us to be both a miracle and a work in progress.

After the disciples saw Jesus transfigured - Jesus in conversation with those spiritual giants, Moses and Elijah, Jesus shining as if lit up from the inside - they came back down from the mountaintop with Him, and down into the valley of ordinary life and its heartache and disappointment and set-backs and temptations. We need the mountaintops where we see Jesus' glory... times when we experience heaven touch earth... but we live in the valley and this is where we need a sustaining relationship with Christ.

I started my sermon telling you about the little plant my mother gave me that I neglected, and it died. Yesterday when I threw it away I was sad that I'd let this happen, and I realized it was a metaphor for the spiritual life. When we neglect it, we ignore it... it withers and its leaves fall off and it has no life. And when that happens in our lives, how can the glory of Jesus be manifested in us? How can His love flow into us and through us? How can we be transformed into His likeness? I know it was just a plant that I neglected... but the Holy Spirit used it to show me that the spiritual life - if we are to be transformed into the likeness of Christ - needs be tended.

And so we come to the season of Lent, this season of tending to the things of the Spirit. Tuesday evening is 'Fat Tuesday' when we'll share an overly-indulgent meal of doughnuts, sausages, and eggs... in preparation for the austerity and fasting of Lent. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and that afternoon or evening we'll receive ashes to be reminded of the brevity and frailty of life. Next Sunday we'll read about Jesus' time in the wilderness, where He fasted for 40 days and was tempted by the devil.

Lent shows up at just the right time. Paul tells us that we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, and yet like neglected plants, our spirits may be drooping, our relationships with Christ neglected and ignored. We need these 40 days of Lent to walk closely with Jesus... to be filled and nurtured with His Spirit. There's a card in the

bulletin for you on how to observe these coming 40 days of Lent. It's not a list of everything you can do, but suggestions of how to tend to your spirit, to tend to the Spirit of God.

In preparation for this season of more intense and intentional spiritual practice, we first come to the Lord's Table, to receive His body, broken for us, and to receive His blood spilled out for the forgiveness of our sin. I invite the worship leaders, Communion servers, and visiting Communion stewards to join me at the table. Please look at the insert in the bulletin as we prepare ourselves for this holy meal.