

# From Jesus' Transfiguration to Ours

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**Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:2**

This week, the news cycle has been dominated by the president's summit with North Korea, the Cohen hearings, and questions about security clearances at the White House. For news junkies, it's been a feeding frenzy.

So you may have missed an important religious news story coming out of St. Louis. There United Methodists met in a special General Conference to decide if the church would be more welcoming or less welcoming to gay and lesbian Christians. Sadly, the decision was made that this branch of Jesus' family would not be welcome to lead or marry in the church.

This was something of a surprise because for three years, church leaders worked on a compromise plan that allowed local congregations, clergy, and regions to make their own decisions on this matter. But while 2/3 of the U.S. delegates voted for plan, they were outvoted by stateside conservatives and global traditionalists. So now, the hurtful language and practice inscribed in the Methodist Book of Discipline remains, leaving many feeling betrayed and anguished.

One of these is J. J. Warren, a gay divinity student who implored the gathering to be fully welcoming toward all: "As someone who has grown up in our church, as someone who is gay, my

evangelism . . . has grown. (These folks) didn't know God could love them because their churches said God didn't."

Voice cracking, he pled for a unity based in love rather than belief: "No plan to separate us can unite us like God's love (can)."

Another person deeply impacted by what happened in St. Louis is a father in our church. I saw him the morning after the decision and he was near tears. His gay daughter has just about given up on the church over the constant pounding she receives from Christians and churches and who don't seem to recognize that she too is a child of God. This Knollwood father is heartsick over the decision in St. Louis, as are many others, whether they are United Methodists or not.

Disappointment with the church: in some circles, that disappointment is raging this morning as some wonder when and if they can ever return to a church that isn't ready to welcome them, their family or friends.

Fortunately, the Bible has a whole book devoted to disappointment with the church: it's called the Second Letter to the Corinthians. In this letter, Paul wrestles with the church he founded in a thriving Greek metropolis. And here, more than in any other letter, he is honest and hurting, foaming and furious, heartsick and human.

Some members of the Corinthian church have attacked Paul's credibility and are seeking to undermine his leadership, so he pushes back with both forthrightness and love: "We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians," he writes. "Yet our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affection but only in yours" (2 Cor. 6:12). It seems 21st century Christians were not the first to put limits on the boundless love of God.

And yet, in the midst of this fiery letter, there are glimmers of hope. Paul reminds himself and the Corinthians of the transforming power of the resurrection. Because the power of Christ' life and love courses through that very imperfect church, and those very imperfect people, the

congregation's missteps and stumbles, blunders and miss-directions, are not the end of the journey with Jesus.

The German poet, Heinrich Heine, was standing with a friend before a French cathedral.

"Tell me, Heinrich," said his companion, "why can't we build (churches) like this anymore?"

"My dear friend," Heine replied, "in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than an opinion to build a Gothic cathedral."

Paul is driven by the conviction, hard-won through his own experience, that the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. So there is no setback, disappointment, or defeat, no matter how ominous or overwhelming that gets the final word because God got the final word on Easter morning. As Paul writes in the opening lines of 2 Corinthians, "We were utterly, unbearably crushed" and "we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8b-9).

Sometimes, we have to die to our idealistic expectations of ourselves and others before we realize how desperately we need resurrection.

The poet/preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor argues a certain amount of disillusionment is essential to the Christian life.

"Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion," she writes, "about ourselves, about the world, about God. And while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth."

And yet, amid the bad news, the good news is this: Whenever we let go of one of our idolatrous half-truths that creates a new opportunity for an encounter with the living God. Which is why Paul drops this little gem into that mess of a church called Corinth: "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”  
( 2 Cor. 3:18)

That word, “transformed,” is the Greek word for metamorphosis. It’s the word two of the gospels use for the transfiguration of Jesus. Thus, Paul takes the transfiguration, the *metamorphosis* of Jesus out of some rarified, other-worldly realm and claims that what happened to Jesus on that mountain, can and must, in some measure, happen to us.

And so Paul invites the Corinthians and us to approach God with an “unveiled” face: “And all of us, with *unveiled faces*, seeing the glory of the Lord.”

As Moses took off his veil when entering into God’s presence, so Paul implores the believer to remove whatever veil or mask is preventing a full, unabashed experience of God’s grace and glory. He dares us to become vulnerable and real in God’s presence until, in the words of Maya Angelou,

We are weaned from our timidity  
In the flush of love’s light.  
We dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.

“And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror . . .” For Christian faith, the glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. “For the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

No, we cannot see Christ directly. But when we are hurting and hopeless, we need to take refuge in Christ’s word and Spirit as fast as we can. As the voice on the mountaintop thunders to the three star struck disciples, “This is my son; *listen to him!*” (Luke 9:35).

“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.” It’s that word, “glory,” that throws us. It’s hard for to imagine that ordinary mortals like ourselves might come to more fully reflect and embody the glory of God.

Unless such glory means for us, as it did for Jesus, plunging ever deeper in service and love into the world’s great ache and need, until on the far side of some cross of our own desperation, we are resurrected to a new kind of life.

In Kathleen Norris’ spiritual memoir, *A Cloister Walk*, I learned the Greek word *photismos* is an ancient word for baptism. That word for baptism, *photismos*, shares a root with *photosynthesis*, the process by which leaves turn light into life.

So too in our baptism: we come to life, as the light of God in Jesus Christ permeates, fills, and forgives any unredeemed darkness within us. Baptism signifies the deepest truth of the gospel: that no matter how dark the darkness, the light of God’s life and love shines brighter still.

Yes, I’m hurting for and with Methodist friends who are reeling over the decision to exclude gay believers from their full birthright as children of God. And it is not yet clear what the path forward will be. Some folks will no doubt pull away and start fresh elsewhere. Others will dig in their heels and work for change from within.

But this much I know: the living Christ will continue to challenge and grow his people, both in Methodism and at Knollwood; into an ever fuller embodiment of the all-encompassing love he made the lifeblood of his kingdom.

And we find this too in our own lives. Even our most profound heartbreaks and disappointments are but an invitation to take off our masks, stop pretending, and enter anew into the healing presence of God. Then, in God’s good time, we will begin to grow in tiny, incremental ways into someone who has at least a passing resemblance to Jesus.

The story is told of two prisoners confined to a dark, dank cell. The only light came from a small window, six-inches square, and eight feet off the ground.

Each day, the prisoners took turns, hoisting one another up to the window. That way each could see the sky and feel the warmth of the sun on his face. It was the only way to keep from going mad.

Yes, sometimes we find ourselves in dark, desperate places. But when we do, we need to turn our faces toward the light. And, as our Quaker friends say, we need to “hold *each other* in the light.”

For only the light of God, streaming from the face of Jesus Christ can heal our hurt and give us hope. And that light can also help us see more clearly who we are called to be, and what we are called to do, on the next stretch of the journey with Jesus.

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*Light of the world; shatter whatever darkness has us in the grip of uncertainty and fear. Give us eyes to see your glory, and ears to hear your word, so we can follow you out of the darkness and into the light.*

*In your name we ask this of the eternal God, Amen.*