



Glory in the Face of God



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Last Sunday of Epiphany

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I first met Donna eleven years ago. She was a 40-something - year -old single mom with a teen-aged son. She and her son were estranged from each other by the son's choice. Donna was bored, restless and in jail. I met her through my capacity of volunteer jail chaplain. With such overcrowding in the court system, Donna found herself cooling her heels in jail for an exceptionally long time.

Jails are different from prisons. Jail is where one awaits trial and/or sentencing. Prison is where one is usually sent to serve out their sentence. Jail, then is a really mixed bag, population-wise. In jail you have the guilty and the innocent, the gang-toughened and the naïve, the violent and the mentally ill, the hardened career criminal and the victim of circumstance who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Donna was several of these things, but innocent, she was not. She was being held on some very serious federal charges. If convicted, she could face a long, long stretch in federal prison.

Donna was not a happy camper. It was out of boredom that she began to join us for the weekly Sunday service that was offered. It was out of boredom that she joined us for our weekday visits and discussions. But there was something about Donna that intrigued me. For all her harsh background, she did not seem to fit in a jail atmosphere. There was a dissonance about her being there.

Discreetly observing her interactions with other inmates during my twice weekly visits was revealing. Donna seemed to hold sway over many of the other women, but not through fear or bullying. I noticed that the younger women came to her for some motherly advice, while the older women came for sisterly insight. Most of the time, her advice sounded pretty good.

One Sunday, I asked the Corrections Officers if I could have a few extra minutes alone with Donna to talk. "Donna", I said, "I have noticed something about you. You have the potential to be a fine leader and do a lot of good while you are in here. These women respect you." Her face registered absolute shock. "But I am in jail!!! How can I do anyone any good? It seems that no one had ever recognized any potential in her at all. She had the idea that she was really good for nothing. And so, she lived as if behind a veil. She hid who she really was and who she really wanted to be. She believed what had been taught her – that her only use was to be abused.

Over the next weeks and months, a transformation began in Donna. She tried to live in to what I saw in her. She went from someone who experienced Jesus Christ as the expletive you use when things don't go your way, to someone who saw Jesus as a human being who had also suffered arrest and punishment, and finally as the Christ who was her reason for hope and being! Like on Mt. Tabor, in today's Gospel, this was a process of the lifting of the veil from the face of Jesus to see what that transformed face held for her.

This Gospel story is about being surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. This was the surprise that Donna experienced. She began then, to lift her own veil and reveal to us how God saw her. And what God saw was a thing of beauty.

The process of the lifting of the veil reveals God's glory. Jesus here, allowed the three disciples to see who He really is. Jesus' perfected humanity was the showcase for God's glory – the same glory that will one day be perfected in all our faces. For a brief moment, the veil was lifted from Jesus' face and they saw how God was truly reflected in Him.

Today's Gospel is all about reflection. And glory. To reflect means to bend or throw back light; to reproduce an image. What we glorify changes what we reflect. If we glorify ourselves, we reflect only ourselves; if we glorify, greed, violence, power, bigotry or hatred, that is the only face we will reflect back into the world. What do you glorify? If it is the splendor of God that you most glorify, then your face will reflect it, just Jesus' did.

Nice story about their trip up the mountain, right? But so what? Does this moment of transfiguration have anything to do with us here, today, in Silver Spring? Absolutely.

There was a poignant movie that came out a few years ago: *Dead Man Walking*. This was the true story of Sr. Helen Prejean and the spiritual relationship she had with a convicted killer on death row, Matthew Poncelet. As he went to the death chamber, Matthew nearly collapsed and Sr. Prejean stooped to help him saying, "Look, I want the last thing you see in this world to be the face of love. Will you look at me while they do this thing? Look at me. I'll be the face of love for you."

This man was a vicious killer and yet, she wanted to be the face of love for him? How could she do that? How could anyone do that? She could do it because when she peeked beneath the veil to discover the true face of Jesus, what she saw was unimaginable love. She could do it because love was what she glorified – the face of love that Jesus showed to the world. Again, I ask you what do you glorify? What would it mean if we were truly to be a reflection of the face of love in the world? I think we would stun the world, just as Jesus stunned the disciples.

There are so many faces of hate, fear, violence, anger, bigotry and woundedness in the world. Indeed, we live in what we might call an 'In your face' culture, where besting an adversary is glorified as a virtue; where manipulation and lies are touted as the tools of this virtue. It does not take much imagination to see where this is playing out right now.

What would it mean to be the face of love to someone who hates us; hurts us; to someone we consider contemptible, wrong, foolish or even evil? What would it mean to approach life with hope, gentleness and compassion? How can we etch these qualities on our own faces?

What does it mean to love your enemies? To show the face of love to an enemy means that we think of the absolute best thing we could do for another person and then do that for the person who hates us! How might we remove our own veils and reveal the glory of God in us? You know what to do. Ask for Jesus' help in this. It is what He yearns to hear from you. St. Ignatius had a daily

spiritual habit that helped him stay focused on doing what Christ asked of him. Every day, he would write down a question: Who can I help today? Perhaps we could do the same by asking, For whom can I be the face of Christ today?

To be sure, we are creatures of limitation. We are fallible. But this is not a conversation about perfection. To say we are the face of Christ in the world is a statement of fact as well as a statement of faith. To reflect the face of God, we must first see it. Ask for God's vision of Himself. Ask for God's vision of you. This is an important prayer to say. When Jesus revealed His true face to the disciples, He was not revealing it to perfect human beings, but to the wonderfully confused, terrified and dazed.

These disciples did not expect to see the reflection of God's glory when they took that walk up the mountain to pray that day. Neither do we ever expect it, but the surprising revelation of the glory of God is so close to Jesus' heart. It is the way that God reaches out to every strange, difficult and different one of us. We just need to be mindful of this an LOOK!

This is what Donna discovered. She LOOKED and she allowed the face of Jesus Christ to be revealed to her - to grow from Jesus Christ the expletive to Jesus Christ the hope and love of her life. Donna served her sentence and has been out of prison for a few years now. I still hear from her from time to time. Her relationship with her son has been mended. She is self-supporting and happy. She is doing just great. As her own spirit grows, as her veil lifts, she reflects more and more the face of Jesus Christ in the world. May we all be humble enough to allow Jesus to lift our veils. For whom shall you be the face of Christ today?

Amen.