

Transfigured: Face-to-Face in Freedom

From the sermon series: Until We Take the Shape of Christ

Text: II Corinthians 3:17-18

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Have you ever had an absolutely marvelous vacation in an idyllic spot, and come back and tried to tell people about it and found them to smile and say, "Oh, that's nice." Have you ever been to a retreat or to a seminar where you were just energized and turned on and inspired and came home and tried to tell your colleagues about it and have them say, "Oh, that's interesting." Have you ever been in love hopelessly, wonderfully in love, and tried to put it into words, in rational discourse that could be conveyed to someone, communicated to someone? Of course you can't do that. And if you have had an experience like that, then you can identify with the Early Church, with the Apostles. If Paul sometimes seems scrambled in his New Testament writing, just remember he was trying to express the inexpressible, and if the Early Church Fathers formulated their doctrinal understanding in philosophical language that seems rather arid and awkward and doesn't move you, then understand the problem with which they were dealing. They were trying to say what cannot be said, to make comprehensible that which is incomprehensible, to lay out the mystery that transcends our human understanding.

On Trinity Sunday, I am not going to attempt to give you definitions of God. I'm not going to attempt to give you some doctrinal dissertation on our understanding of God, because to do that is an exercise in futility. But what I do want to do is take you to the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, where you have the intertwining of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit without any attempt to formulate philosophically the relationship. We really are better off with God if we stick to biblical expression.

In this chapter we have an interesting discussion of God Who is the Creator and the Redeemer understood by us as our Parent, our Father. We have that God Who has revealed Himself in the face of Jesus, Jesus, the Word made Flesh; and we have the ministry of the Spirit of Christ, or the Spirit of the Lord, or the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. And Paul weaves all of these together without any kind of systematic formulation.

It was inevitable for the Church to try to give some kind of systematic form to this data, to try to articulate this experience, but that articulation always falls far short of the reality of experience which is given witness to in the Scriptures.

Paul's apostleship being under attack, he says to them, "Look, I don't have to authenticate myself. You are my authentication. You are a letter from Christ, written not with ink on tablets of stone, but written rather by the Spirit of the Living God." In the opening paragraph of the third chapter we have reference to a letter of Christ written by the Spirit of the Living God, and so you have the action of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, but in a way that is very practical, in the way in which God has revealed Himself and made Himself known and impacts our human experience. Paul looked at the congregation of folks like you and he said to them, "You are really the authentication of my apostolic ministry because, to the extent that your lives have been transformed, it is a witness to a work of God wrought through Jesus Christ, by the Spirit. The transformation of your lives, your move from darkness to light, your move from brokenness and the darkness of superstition and fear and guilt to the joy and the liberty of the Children of God is the indication that my ministry has been authentic. I'm not sufficient for these things, and I haven't 'written' you, but Christ has written you. You are a letter from Christ written by the Spirit of the Living God."

That reminds him of that whole ministry which is his in the wake of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit, and he begins to contrast that with the old Covenant, the time of Israel through the ministry of Moses. He goes back to that old Exodus story where Moses, having been in the presence of God, returns to the people and his face is aglow, and the people are afraid. And interestingly, in Paul's use of that passage, Paul says that Moses put a veil over his face so that the people would not see the glory fade. It was like the glow would wash off eventually, and Moses, not wanting to have them see the departure of the glory, veiled his face.

Paul uses that as an analogy, as an illustration of the contrast between the old Covenant and the new, and he says the old Covenant, the religion of Israel, which was preparatory, which was authentic and genuine, but which was not complete, was a ministry whose glory faded. It was a ministry of the letter; it was a kind of religion that was imposed from the outside. It involved Law. Law can point to life, but cannot empower life. Law can show the way, but cannot motivate one to walk the way. The old Covenant was a covenant of rules and rituals, of religious observance. Paul says the new Covenant is a covenant of the Spirit. It is a covenant of the Spirit Who creates freedom in the individual so that inwardly there is a motivation to become all that God has created one to become. In contrasting the old and the new – the ministry of Moses and the ministry of Christ, the ministry of the Letter and the ministry of the Spirit – Paul presents to us the tremendous promise of human transformation. Through the ministry of the Eternal God Who has come to us in Jesus and dwells with us by His Holy

Spirit, we, His people, are being transformed, and that transformation has as its goal our conformity to Jesus.

We saw that in the previous message. We have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. That is God's goal for us. With all of the diversity, with all of the multiplicity of our human experience, there is yet a commonality, which is a reflection of Jesus Christ from the core of our being because we belong to him and have been transformed by him. So, the thing that God is about, this Triune God, the thing that He has been about from the beginning and will finally finish in the end, is the shaping of His children to be the brothers and sisters of Jesus, and that is being effected by the Spirit of God. In the marvelous 18th verse, he says,

...because for us there is no veil over the face, we all reflect as in a mirror the splendor of the Lord; (that is, Christ) thus we are transfigured into his likeness from splendor to splendor. Such is the influence of the Lord Who is Spirit.

We, gazing at Jesus, are changed into the likeness of Jesus. The calling of the Christian is the contemplation and the reflection of Jesus Christ, the imbibing and the reflecting of the reality of Jesus Christ. It is our calling as people to be transfigured, face-to-face in the wonderful freedom that the Spirit creates. Not with cramped, heavy, onerous religion, but with the life-giving Spirit.

Have you ever painted by number? If you have painted by number and enjoy it, keep at it. It's great! It's a lot better than biting your fingernails. But, on occasion I have seen a painting that was painted by number. I can paint by number. I'd probably go out of the lines, because I'm not a person who easily lives within the lines, and I probably would grow impatient and blue here and here. But, I could paint by number. In fact, that's the only way I could paint, being color-blind and without artistic skill. I would number the paints and I would read the number and it would not take a great deal of creativity, a great deal of skill or artistry to paint by number. It's not a bad pastime. But you never mistake a painting by number with a painting of an artist.

The last time that I was in New York, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art because there was a special display of French Impressionism, a private collection that was about to be shipped off to England and probably would never be seen publically again. Some Renoirs, some Monets, and others of that movement. Now, that was a revolutionary movement in art, in painting. When you look closely you see they put the paint on heavily, and they dabbed it on. It's a very rough surface. And there is not a line that is straight. There's not a human form that is carefully formed. There's not a tree that is like any tree I was ever taught to make in elementary art! Nothing looks like anything in terms of an exact facsimile. But, when you see the painting, it jumps off the canvas! There is a use of light which causes, for example, the sun dancing on the ripples of a lake, to seem as though they are shimmering and moving. The Impressionists really

revolutionized painting. One of my favorite artists (not at all because he's Dutch) is Vincent Van Gogh, who wasn't accepted at all in his day and died in terrible poverty. One of his paintings was sold recently for millions of dollars! I hope God is making it right for him in heaven. His figures are grotesque! If you really study it closely and just focus on a figure, it's grotesque! But, stand away and you see that somehow or other the freedom of the artist created a reality far beyond what any photograph could reproduce!

What we are called to, through the God Who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is not to live our lives painting by number with the scrupulosity that makes religion a heavy burden, that binds the human spirit and makes it all an onerous duty. No, the God we celebrate on Trinity Sunday is the God Who would set us free! Set us free to live as artists in this grand universe of His in order that the full potential of our humanity could be exploded and we could become all that He has intended us to be. He, the Divine Artist, Who has created us in His image, is calling us to become like Jesus. So, Paul says not in a crimped and cramped, heavy religion, but face to face with Jesus we are being transformed by the working of His Spirit within us and we are beginning to take on the shape and the measure of Jesus Christ in the fullness of our human experience.

There is no way in the world that I can make that happen for you, or you can make it happen for me. I said last week on Pentecost I'm always most acutely aware at this time of the year of both the promise and the impossibility of preaching. It is like trying to tell you about a vacation that you didn't experience and that just turned me on; like trying to tell you about a retreat experience that energized me and excited me that I can't possibly communicate; like trying to tell you in rational discourse what it means to be dizzily in love. But, maybe as we talk about it, as we sense that it is God's purpose for us to have us blossom forth into beautiful human beings, maybe at least we'll be clearing the ground and getting rid of that crotchety idea of religion – form and ritual and law and legality and condemnation – and see that God loves us with an everlasting love, and He's gone to the depths of the earth, to Hell itself, to set us free and let us be!

It's like healing. You cut your hand, put salve on it and say that that will heal it. The salve won't heal it. Salve may cleanse it, may keep it soft, may get rid of the bacteria. Salve may remove the impediment to healing, but healing is the body's function; healing is a mystery. The ground can be cleared, but only the body can heal itself, because there is a healing, recuperative power within the body, which is there by the grace of God Who made us.

So with our human spirit. So with the transformation of our lives. Here and there it happens. Now and again. It happens most often when we're looking for it, when we're thirsting for it, when we're in the place where God has promised to meet us. To be transformed into the likeness of Jesus comes about more readily if we're gazing into his face. That is, if the portrait of Jesus painted for us by the great

Impressionists, the Gospel writers, is always playing through our being; if we sense the mastery with which he lived, the devotion, the commitment, the communion, the compassion, the love, the grace, the beauty of who he was, and with an openness and a prayer that his Spirit will be effecting that in us. It does happen, from splendour to splendour, from degree to degree - people moving toward the realization of God's purpose, which is conformity to Jesus Christ.

Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Julius II, who was not the finest Pope in Church history. He had a great ego and a desire to have the grandest tomb in Rome. Michelangelo was commissioned to sculpt some huge, gigantic, heroic figures that would be a part of his tomb. Michelangelo was his own person as well as Julius, and they got into an argument. The tomb never happened, and some of the figures that Michelangelo was working on can be seen in Florence, Italy in the same place as his statue of David. The huge blocks of granite are still there, and the figures are beginning to emerge. There's been enough chiseling and sculpting so that you can see what the figure was going to be. They are heroic figures, and you can see them as though they are trying to get out of the block! Get free from the granite! Free to move! Free to be human! They are called "The Prisoners." Many of us, much of our lives, are prisoners. There are stages in our lives when we'd like to just kick it all over and find freedom. We'd like to divest ourselves of every form of human control, every human bondage, every responsibility and obligation and find freedom. The French Existentialist Jean Paul Sartre spoke about that kind of freedom, and he was a nihilist. That means one ends up where nothing means anything. That is a possible end of freedom, understood as autonomy. Some of us give it a shot once in a while, but it never fulfills its promise. But the freedom that the Spirit engenders is not a freedom just to do whatever we want, but freedom to become what we were intended to be. Icons of Jesus, that's the Greek word, icons of Jesus reflecting his beauty from the inside out. That's really who we are - the beauty of Jesus, our Elder Brother, shining through us. Transfixed, face to face in freedom.

Let us pray.

God, our Father, give us a taste for that high purpose for which you have made us and to which you call us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.