

Yr. C, Epiphany Last
March 3, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1073 Words

Lessons: Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36

This morning I want to offer a pastoral sermon, speaking foremost about the radiant glory of a loving God, and also with comfort for all the hurting and fearful souls of Christ's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, divided and broken as we are. It has been a rough few weeks in our Anglican Communion, in the Roman Catholic Church, for our United Methodist sisters and brothers, and—undoubtedly—among many others.

I believe the plain, unspoken truth of the post-modern Church is this: We *want* to love God, but we also want to remain as we are. We desperately want to remain strong, invulnerable, and unchanged. Deep down we know we cannot have it both ways. God knows we are foolish. *And...* God loves us anyway.

The ancient stories of Moses serve as images for the ways in which we are *saved by love*. That sweet, Jewish baby boy was plucked from a sinking basket in the reeds of the river, Nile. Moses was drawn out of the water by Pharaoh's own daughter.

This is how we are saved by love. This is how we are strengthened by love. This is how we are changed by love.

“Grant, O Lord, that we—beholding the light of your countenance—may be strengthened to bear our cross, *and be changed* into your likeness.”¹

In the flickering candlelight of the parson's house, passersby could see their priest at work through the dusty windows. George Herbert was born of English nobility in the late 16th century, yet he chose a life of simplicity. He chose devotion to God, and to his neighbors in the parish of Bemerton. He was a priest and a poet. He has given—even to us—the words to hear how love will save us...how love will strengthen us...how love will change us. His poem, *Love III*, begins like this:

“Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.”²

That sweet baby, Moses was saved by the daughter of the enemy of his people. She crossed unimaginable boundaries to love and to be loved. She nurtured the child who would confront Pharaoh, and liberate the Jewish people from slavery. This is how we are saved by love. This is how we are strengthened by love. This is how we are changed by love.

“Grant, O Lord, that we—beholding the light of your countenance—may be strengthened to bear our cross, *and be changed* into your likeness.”

George Herbert knew very well our temptation to see the *unworthiness* in ourselves and in others. He knew that

¹ Paraphrased from the Collect for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany.

² *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1978.

the thing we lack is the confidence to be loved...and to be changed. His love poem continues by answering Love's question of whether I lacked anything:

“A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”

Moses was invited—as a guest—to climb Mt. Sinai. He looked upon God and *lived*. His face shone with the glory of God, a fearful sight for his people to behold.

Of course, they were afraid! They wanted to draw back to the familiar dust and sin...of slavery. We still think we can survive the darkness, as long as it is *our familiar darkness*.

Yet, the face of Moses revealed God's radiant Light that was transforming a whole *nation* of slaves into a freedom-loving people. Please remember the countenance of Moses' shining face, for it is an image of the ways we are called by God to risk being challenged. You and I are invited by Love to risk being *changed*.

“Grant, O Lord, that we—beholding the light of your countenance—may be strengthened to bear our cross, *and be changed* into your likeness.”

George Herbert knew the Church's temptation of clinging to our familiar past, averting our eyes from God—whose radiant love is changing us from the inside out. Father Herbert knew our resistance to being *fully* loved. He knew our conviction of unworthiness, even to look upon God, and so he wrote:

“Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.”

The truth and beauty of the story of Moses prefigures the story of Jesus' transfiguration. On the mountain of the transfiguration, Jesus revealed the glory and radiance of someone who allowed himself to become *completely changed* by the love of God. Jesus has shown us the unmistakable intensity of God's effect on our lives, if *only* we are willing to be loved. He is our image of the way *we* can be transformed by God. Christ is the perfect image of how we are transformed by love.

“Grant, O Lord, that we—beholding the light of *your* countenance—may be strengthened to bear our cross, *and be changed* into your likeness.”

As well as George Herbert knew of our human resistance to be loved and changed, he knew even more profoundly the persistence of God...the perseverance of Love...and so he concluded his poem with an image of our final surrender to God's invitation for *every single unworthy person* in the world, an invitation to Holy Communion with God and one another.

“You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.”

This is the good *and* challenging news of the Transfiguration. Jesus shows us not only how to love, but also how to *be loved*.

The plain, unspoken truth of our post-modern Church is this: We want to love God, but we also want to remain as we are. We desperately want to remain strong, invulnerable, and unchanged. Deep down we know we cannot have it both ways. God knows we are foolish! God loves us anyway.

And so, beloved, may you risk being *completely* loved by God. May you risk being *changed* by God's love. May we, in this Holy Communion with God and each other, taste the meat of Love...be strengthened to bear our cross...and be changed into the likeness of Christ, who lives with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one ***loving*** God, forever and ever.

Amen.