

C Ash Wednesday 3.2.22

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Focus Statement: God sees us for who we are and loves us unconditionally

Every so often in the middle of the service, one of the readings will catch me in a way it hadn't during the week previous while I was wrestling with the texts and I'll think, "that right there, there's the sermon." And then there's nothing I can do about that realization, because at that point we are like three minutes out from the delivery of the sermon and I'm not about to trust myself to go off script three minutes in advance.

Last Sunday, was one of those Sundays. Just as a refresher, let me read for you the verses from Second Corinthians that set me off. Paul writes: "Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside... Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed."

Maybe it was because we spent some time during the council meeting talking about whether or not to lift our mask recommendation but hearing these words about being veiled or unveiled as we all sat masked struck me. Not because I felt like we all need to rip off our masks and be "unveiled before the Lord" or anything weird like that. Quite frankly, even at the point when we do lift the mask recommendation, if any of you want to keep wearing them, one hundred percent be my guest. You do you when it comes to masks. I've said before, I've always admired Eileen who before the pandemic would mask if she had a cold. Eileen was fogging her glasses on behalf of others before it was cool, and I hope when

this whole thing is over, I will remember to do the same. But when Paul did this flip with the use of the word veil, moving from the physical veil Moses covered himself with, because his face literally glowed after speaking to the Lord, to the spiritual veil some in the Corinthian community were using to promote their own authority. This flip got me thinking about how the donning of these physical veils have unveiled a lot about our culture, things that we might have preferred to keep hidden. Things like racism, economic inequality, broken social systems, and so much anger. A pandemic in which the world collectively veiled its faces unveiled a lot of sin and brokenness.

The other thing that caught me about this text where Paul called us to be unveiled before the Lord is how initially opposite it reads when set against today's Gospel text, where Jesus essentially tells his followers to veil their faith practices from the eyes of others. "Don't be like the hypocrites," Jesus proclaimed, who display their piety right out in the open. Instead pray in secret, give alms in secret, fast in secret, "so that your Father who sees in secret will reward you." This text has always seemed like a strange one for Ash Wednesday, the day when we literally mark our faces with the sign of our worship attendance, but with last weekend's Second Corinthians reading still rattling around in my head I wasn't sure what to do with it.

But as I sat with the text, it began to occur to me that what Jesus was cautioning against in Matthew is using piety as its own form of a veil. Of wrapping yourself in a veil of prayer, of charity, of religion for religion's sake, so that no one can see who you are, what's really going on. You're not fooling God, Jesus points out. Your Father sees in secret, God knows

what is going on behind the show of piety, you're only fooling others, and eventually, and worse, yourself.

But the thing about veils is, veils are comfortable. Not these ones really, these ones can be kind of hard to breathe through, and I feel bad every Sunday for you all in your glasses. But metaphorical veils, veils that allow us to put on airs and feel like things are fine and ignore what's really going on, those are really really comfortable. Addictive even. And it's hard and painful work to take them down.

But at its core, that is what this day, Ash Wednesday, is about. It is about stripping down the veils we build around ourselves, so that we can stand before God as who we are. Not adorned in fancy robes of prayer or charity or piety, but just as ourselves. In a few minutes, you will be invited into the disciplines of lent, "to self-examination and penitence, prayer and fasting, almsgiving and works of love." And then we will confess together our sin. A lot of sin. This time of confession we share together on Ash Wednesday is longer, more detailed, more specific than what we normally share together on a Sunday. And here's what I want to invite you to do in that time. To do in every confession we share together in this season. I want to invite you to lean into this time. To let the words of this confession be an unveiling before God. You know how good it feels when you get back in your car, or back home, or maybe just outside the door, and you take your mask off and you can breathe and see again, let this confession feel like that. Because these veils we hide behind, I said that they are comfortable, but the truth is they're comfortable until they're not. And we cannot feel the lightness of forgiveness until we have recognized the weight of all we are

holding. Maya Angelou famously remarked, “do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Confession is a time of letting God teach us better, so that we can be better, so that we can change and grow. Confession, forgiveness, unveiling, rearranging, all of this is how we grow, how we transform, how we are transfigured, if you will, to reflect God’s love.

There is a Japanese art form called Kintsugi that often comes to mind for me around Ash Wednesday. Literally translating as “golden joining,” Kintsugi is a method of repairing broken pottery with a gold filling, so that rather than disguising the brokenness, the breaks themselves become the art. The philosophy behind this is the breaks are not flaws in the piece, they are its history, its story, something to be remembered for how from those breaks the piece was transformed.

Last Sunday when Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah, arrayed in his glory, they were speaking of his departure. The disciples kept silent after the transfiguration because they had only seen a preview, they did not yet know the whole picture. In six weeks, we will gather here again at this time, to see the whole picture, to bear witness to that departure. We will remember how Jesus was broken, how his body was pierced, both his nails and his side. How inexplicably brightly Christ’s glory shined from a cross. Three days later, when he had been resurrected and appeared before his disciples, he appeared with nail marks in his hands and his side, signs of the power of brokenness to transform.

Dear people of God, may this day break you. May you have the courage on this day to open yourself up and stand wholly as you are before the God who knows you. May this ashy cross be a sign of that brokenness. Because God does God's best work with broken people. In the immortal words of Leonard Cohen, "there is a crack in everything, it's how the light gets in." Thanks be to God, before whom we can stand fully as ourselves. Amen.