

Romans 8:1-11 - Matthew 13:1-9
Chesapeake City United Methodist Church
“Appearing to Be Christian or Being One”
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¡Sisters and brothers, buenos días! Would you please pray with me?

Holy Spirit, speak with us here and now. Holy Spirit, speak to us here and now. Holy Spirit, speak through us and speak in spite of us here and now. Amen!



Your mind might be telling you otherwise, but I can guarantee you that I am the same guy who is in that picture. As you can see, I used to have a clean shaved face and very short hair. Since November of 2016, I decided to let my hair and beard grow – if you wanted to know what triggered such decision, I would love to share it with you later, in person.

I never thought that a simple and superficial change in the appearance would help me to see people’s interaction deeply different. I cannot tell you how many times I have not been recognized at first by people who I know for a long time. “Nice to meet you. My name is... wait a second. Have I met you before? Why do I feel I have seeing you?” – I stand there smiling while they continued wondering - “You look a lot like a guy who lives in Dover,” I heard people say to me.

I have played soccer almost entire games with the same team I have played since 2008 and just at the end of the game, some of my own teammates came to me and said “Man, I was wondering who the hairy midfielder was. That accent sounded familiar, but I didn’t recognize you with all the hair in the face!”

Others, like my family from Colombia and closer friends, have been explicitly outspoken about the slow hairy progression. “I don’t like it! You should shave it. You don’t look like my brother. You look like Moses. You look like Noah. You look like Che Guevara –the Argentinian revolutionary from the 50’s and 60’s. You look, you look. You look. The power of the image, my friends! We project onto others who we want to see or what we want to see.

I will share with you, however, that this look did help when I played Jesus’ role on Maundy Thursday this past April during Holy Week. The service was graphically powerful. Semi naked and covered with makeup that simulated blood all over my body, I walked through the aisle while carrying on my back a decent size cross and a thorn crown on my head. That image made the following lines alive: “Blessed are the undocumented, blessed are the refugees, blessed are the single mothers, blessed are the seekers of justice, blessed are the unhoused sisters and brothers, blessed are the peace makers because theirs is the kingdom of heaven!” It was a beautiful service for many but my wife. I got crucified on Thursday night and on Good Friday, she woke me up early, gave me a list of errands and another one with house items I should take care of for the Spring cleaning day. She didn’t even wait the three days until resurrection Sunday!

In a superficial society, the look does condition our interaction with others. On top of that, if you added the multiple layers of race, socio-economic status and idea of “exclusive” sexual orientation, a lot of times the look becomes – sadly - the first and only superficial filter through which we are willing to engage with others. We, who have been created in the image of God – meaning with the essence of God’s love, compassion, grace - are called to be in relationship with God and with one another yet that relationship is mostly corrupted by the superficiality of physical appearance. That tells us a lot about how shallowed we are at the moment to experience discipleship in the newness that God provides.

I consider that the two Scripture portions read today talk to us about the levels of commitment we might be involved at the time we want to engage in a transformative relationship with God and with our neighbors. Matthew 13 walks us through the first of six parables that Jesus taught to the crowd. He compares how the same water comes down from above into the different surfaces where the seeds have fallen. That

is the same Word interpreted differently by our different hearts, different surfaces. On the other text, Paul writes to the Romans making a comparison by contrast about the differences between living under the law of death and the law of the Spirit.

It is clear for Paul that the law of the Spirit in Christ leads to life, to new life, that sets us free. But, free from what? Free from sin. But, what sin? We cannot get a full understanding of the text if we first don't recall where Paul is coming from. We have to remember that Paul used to be Saul, a persecutor, an oppressor and a killer of those who started following this Son of Man named Jesus.

After his encounter with Jesus where he got blind, Paul rectifies his purpose of life, and with his letters to the different communities of faith, he tries to exhort the already followers of Christ to not take advantage of God's grace, to not succumb to persecution, to not let numb their spirit before the injustice we see, we hear, or the ones we are part of despite the oppression. His transformation took him to advise that because God's Spirit has come Jesus like, we – who are transformed from the systems of oppression by Jesus' radical example - should follow that path and not dare to give us permission to take God's infinite grace for granted.

The two ways of living are presented by Paul clearly in two paths; under the law of sinful nature that is centered in self or to live under the law of the Spirit that leads human kind into connectivity, wholeness and communion.

The latter is a law where your pain becomes mine and vice-versa. It is law of the Spirit that gives us life even when the complexity of its experience seems or looks strange to us. That is, for me, the difference between appearing to be a follower of Christ and being one. Appearing to be a follower of Jesus is based on self-righteousness; I don't drink, smoke, steal, I don't kill, curse and yet leads us into isolation and a condescending sense of superiority. Appearing to be a recipient of Jesus's Spirit is also based on what we have; I have this house, this car, this professional career, status. But, appearance is not what we are called to internalize. On the other hand, being one who follows the Son of Man and the Son of God is based on openness to transformation, sincerity, recognition of error – repentance - and sacrificing my own privilege for the sake of the common good without expecting something in exchange.

Paul asks us to distance ourselves from the sinful nature of social indifference, personal apathy and hateful resentment that causes death. We can be death while alive: when we are fearful, selfish, discriminative and centered on accumulating goods for my own sake, I am death alive. Paul says that faith rather than a passive

force is in fact an action which seeks redemption and justice for all. Being a follower of Christ is to live towards holiness as captives of right-doing without hesitation; the right thing to do is motivated by an obligation of the law but because the love of God, who commands us so for the transformation of our spirit and the world.

It is a wonderful thing to be reminded by Paul – a former oppressor and now announcer of the Good News - that Christ came for all, not for one nation, one race, and one gender.

Jesus came to precisely break down any human categorization that keeps God's creation from the relationship with the Creator in constant communion with the Spirit of life; not superficially but in depth togetherness and community life.

No redemption from oppression would be possible without the incorruptible concept of God's grace. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, understands God's grace as a banquet that feeds all humanity. In that sense, we are called to love God with all who we are. Generally, the Bible narrates the story of how the creation, its fall, and its redemption which are concepts lived in community through which consequences are both suffered and enjoyed by the whole and not individually. Therefore, as Jesus followers, we should live thinking of, crying out and walking with those who are suffering, creating spaces where all life is moving toward its fulfillment. Are we living with hearts ready for such fulfillment?

What a better example to explain that fulfillment than John Wesley himself. He, who strongly opposed slavery and resisted the abusive actions taken against children for the benefit of Industrial Revolution, also opposed to allow female leadership in the church. Susanna Wesley, John's mother, disagreed with educating only boys. She was the feminist of the family who has to be recognized today as the founder and Mother of Methodism.

She challenged what, until then, was considered Biblically supported: the belief that women should not be leaders of the church. The mother of the Wesley family opened her kitchen to teach young girls basic math, writing, and reading skills. This was a cornerstone to accept and honor women in leadership positions. She emphasized the importance of conscience development through a systematic teaching that later became part of John Wesley's methodology to check himself with God's purpose and God's holy grace.

Susanna Wesley's sense of community and service surpassed the church policies, creating a model of challenging the existing religious structures that continued with her son. John's initial rejection of women's leadership stopped thanks to Susanna

who recommended John to not remove the first woman lay preacher from leadership in a class meeting. Susanna convinced John to listen to her preaching first and see if the Holy Spirit was at work. He went and after experiencing a woman leading, he determined that the Spirit was indeed at work. Have you found yourself in a similar situation where an experience changes your way of thinking, believing?

That is the Spirit of Life that we are invited to join, the one that transforms our stubborn minds and hearts. The same water and seed came down from the above to Susanna and John Wesley but their soils were not equally prepared. Susanna's soil had space for roots to take place. John's seemed, appeared to be ready but was shallow. Only after an experience of liberation, John came alone to the other side of the fence.

How can our heart be transformed into being a follower of Jesus rather than appearing to be in one? Being truly one is costly and dangerous.

Today, Archbishop Father Oscar Romero will be beatified by Pope Francis in El Salvador. Father Oscar Romero is the embodiment of Liberation Theology, the theological framework that bases its belief on God's preferential option for the poor. According to this, God has walked, God walks and God will always walk side by side with the marginalized to protect them, liberate them and through those in the margin now liberated from oppressed systems, humanity is redeemed.

Father Oscar Romero's witness shows us how costly being a follower of Christ is. This Salvadorian priest was killed on March 20th, 1980 at the moment he was presiding the Lord's Supper in a small chapel attached to the Hospital Divine Providence in San Salvador.

From the outside chapel's door, a car stopped as Father Oscar Romero was blessing the elements of body and blood of Christ. From that car, a shooter ended the life of a powerful voice. Literally, the blood of Christ was shed before the sacred altar. His homilies addressed social injustices, poverty, persecution and assassination of farmers and people of the common against a military dictatorship supported by, among others, the government of the United States of the moment with Jimmy Carter as president. To all members of the military, he called them out addressing them as follow, "brothers from our own people, you are killing your own farmer fellows and before an order to kill, God's law not to kill prevails (...)" said father Romero at his homily one day before his assassination.

I am not telling you to become a martyr, no. But, I do suggest entering into a moment of self-reflection and ask: in what place does my heart stand on? Is it the surface, in the path of apathy where birds come and eat the seeds away from me because I am closed minded, closed hearted? Or, is my heart on the rocky place where the seeds cannot grow their roots and instead is filled with fear and lack of confidence? Or maybe, my heart is shocking the plants, family members, friends, and strangers around me because my heart is filled with thorns?

May we be determinant to relate with one another beyond the “looks like”. May our heart be sensitive to the water spread upon us from the above, so we could become the soil where the seeds of love, compassion and peace take root. And, may we choose to live under the law of the Spirit that leads us into new life, together, valuing the sacredness of our neighbors.

May it be so. Amen.