

2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4: 2 “Lifting the Veil” 3/3/19 Rev. Janet Chapman

One of my favorite things to do after work is head over to Centimudi Boat Ramp on Shasta Lake with my dogs and hike along the trail. It is an amazing treat when the sky is clear, the clouds are few, and Mt. Shasta comes into view over the lake in all its glory. Never did I guess in those days back in the flatlands of the Midwest that I would live in such a glorious and picturesque place such as this. Yet even we here in Redding have our less than picturesque moments, and the past 7 months there have been a few too many. As I was walking on the trail after the snow had cleared and before the massive rains of last week hit, I came across a manzanita tree with beautiful maroon and plum colored wood which had been toppled by the snow; it seems that the manzanita shrubs didn't fare so well in our snow-mageddon. As you look at them, you can possibly see one of the reasons why: they are short, stocky, and not well-rooted.

Being short and stocky myself, it led me to ponder a bit about this metaphor within creation. Jeremiah 17 says, “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; the year of drought it is not anxious and it does not cease to bear fruit.” Thomas Long points out that whether we are a tree or a shrub depends on what we are rooted in. In our text this morning, Paul is writing to the community of Corinth which has gone from being firmly rooted in the good news to trying to subsist in an uninhabited

salt land. The Corinthians have gone from being strong, heavily rooted trees, able to withstand even the worst of storms, willing to place their full trust in God, to shrubs whose roots were no longer sinking deep into the rich soil of the Risen Christ.

Taking up the symbolism of the veil Moses wore when interacting with God's people, Paul alludes to the idea that the veil prevents the people of God from true and authentic connection with God. Both Jeremiah and Paul have similar goals in mind – to prompt their hearers to embrace the full truth about God and therefore trust God completely. For Paul, that truth is revealed through the person of Jesus and his gospel, from which the Corinthians have chosen to hide. He notes that when his hearers cannot see God's power breaking forth even in the midst of life's storms, a veil has impeded their sight. If indeed God's power is veiled in their sight, it is because they have relinquished their loyalties to another power, they have allowed negative forces and influences to have the upper hand. Having said that, I must share this text causes me some concerns, especially as it has shaped our views on Jews and Muslims. Paul's use of the veil image is actually misleading as it points to Moses' face being covered after having spent time with God on top of the mountain. The actual story tells of Moses' face shining with such intensity, having encountered God face to face, that he had to drape his face so as not to scare the Israelites. However, Paul adds to the story insinuating the veil was required because the people's hearts were hardened. The Jews were simply not ready to encounter the glory of God. It is not until Christ comes along that the veil is removed so that the scriptures can be understood. Taken to its extreme, this text becomes prime fodder for anti-Jewish sentiment. That was not what Paul intended – as a Jew himself, Paul was having a theological family dispute with members of his family who didn't agree that Jesus was the

Anointed One of God. How many of us would want our family disputes to be recorded for all eternity as gospel truth, taken out of context and turned against your family to persecute them? In the age of social media where private interactions suddenly become public, we have to remember the idea isn't that far-fetched. This family letter must stay within its context and read as encouragement to lift the veil which had shrouded the hearts of the Corinthians and left their minds clouded— it is not a statement on all of Judaism.

There is a beautiful statue on the campus of Tuskegee University in Alabama entitled "Lifting the Veil of Ignorance." It is of Booker T. Washington, who founded Tuskegee University in 1881, standing over a slave and lifting a veil so that the light of education can strike his face. The slave, crouched down, has a book in one hand and is using the other hand to help lift the veil. His feet are poised to stand and move forward. The slave is looking out into the world with eyes wide open, filled with hope. The caption under the statue reads, "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry." Paul wanted to show his church family how the wise teachings of Jesus were wake up calls to a people that had closed themselves off, had been draped in veils of deception and blindness.

This leads me to another concern and that is how this text has perpetuated bigotry towards Muslim women wearing the hijab, the traditional Islamic headdress. Paul's nudging to lift the veil draping the hearts of the Corinthians has given this false impression to Westerners to be suspicious of traditional Islamic veils, when nothing could be further from the truth. Failing to see beyond the hijab to the human life behind it is far more a sign of the state of our hearts than it is about anyone else. Speaking against the wearing of veils not only damages our

understanding of others' spiritual practices and identities, but it also inhibits people of other faiths from being willing to engage Christians in interfaith dialogue.

Brian McLaren remembers an interfaith gathering in DC just after 9/11 where lifting the veil to witness God's glory came in an unexpected format. The Muslims hosted the gathering and the imam asked each faith leader to answer, "What, according to my tradition, is my duty to my neighbor of another religion?" It was a great question and everyone had the best of intentions. The first speaker was a Sikh from India. For whatever reason, he managed to insult the hosts in his very first sentence, even as he raised a valid concern. "My first duty to my neighbors," he said, "is not to send them off into another room as second-class citizens, as has been done to the women here today." Awkward! The next speaker was a Catholic priest who had labored for many hours over a brilliant scholarly paper which he read...every word... in a perfectly flat monotone...without looking up...even once. His 10 minutes must have felt like an hour for those not fluent in academic prose. Then came a Protestant minister who read a paper filled with lots of quotes also delivered in an emotionally low-cal monotone. He spoke of our Christian duty to see Christ in all people and then managed to offend almost everyone by saying that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had even seen Christ in Hitler. The 2 rabbis physically squirmed and furiously massaged their eyebrows as if choreographed. Brian thought it couldn't get any worse until a Pentecostal pastor with a good heart spoke. He started getting emotional, which the people seemed to like in comparison to the previous speakers. The more emotional he got, the faster he talked, and the speed, combined with his deep southern accent, combined with his generous use of evangelical lingo, meant that he was completely incomprehensible to most of the folks in the room, for whom English was a second language. Soon he was shouting

something to the effect: "I love you! I love you all! And because I love you, it is my duty, my neighbors, to tell you that you are all going to hell unless you repent and receive Jesus Christ as your personal Lord, Savior, Healer and Deliverer." So, Brian thought, it could get worse – he was ready to crawl under his chair. Tears ran down the preacher's face as he shouted how much he didn't want them to be in hell forever and Brian prayed, "Oh God, let the world just end now." Thirty minutes later, he wrapped it up, and Brian couldn't believe what happened next.

Applause! Extended, loud applause! McLaren was utterly shocked, how was this possible? Were they glad he told them they were going to hell? No, he was quite certain few had gotten beyond his style to capture any of the content of his words. Were they happy for it to be over? Maybe in part. Were they responding to his emotion, spirit, and conviction? Did the "I love you! I love you all!" come through so powerfully that everything else seemed unimportant in that moment? Yes, he was quite certain that was it. In the days after, Brian tried to get his head around what happened. He concluded that in the aftermath of 9/11, maybe in the aftermath of any disaster, people need a connection firmly rooted in love, not a monotone of surface calm. They needed the Spirit, despite the fact that most couldn't understand what was said, and thank God for that! They needed eye contact, a face to face human interaction, not a monotone fulfillment of some responsibility. They needed to step beyond the posturing of differing faiths and be transformed by the Spirit of God to walk the path of compassion. With unveiled faces, those present experienced roots being encouraged to grow deep and strong in the fertile soil of God's Love. In spite of misguided words, the people felt sincere, uninhibited, overflowing and outpouring love and the walls came down, and they erupted in applause. And that is the messy, strange and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit – Thanks be to God!