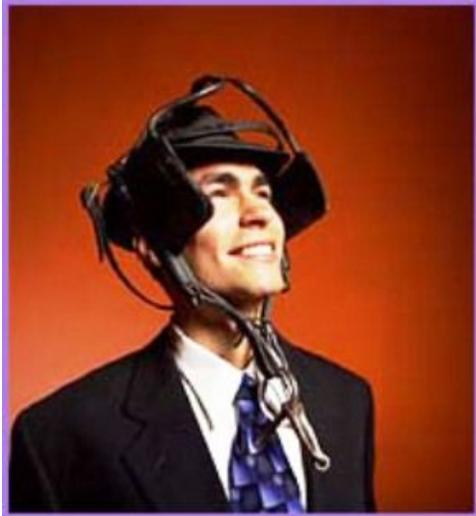


Sacrament

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

2 Corinthians 3:12-18



12 Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. 13 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. 14 But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. 15 Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. 16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Last Sunday our Confirmation class looked at the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. For Baptism, I filled a plastic sled with water and in the water I placed readings from the New Testament about Baptism. We dipped our hands in the water and fished the texts out one by one and had a great conversation about the many aspects of Baptism.

Likewise, after drying our hands, we headed up to this table and explored the meaning of Communion. We took bread and broke it. We poured out a pitcher of grape juice. We talked about who was welcome at this table and what it meant to be a part of it. We talked about the meaning of the word, "Sacrament" and I was delighted to hear our young people come up with the words, "Promise" and "Sacrifice" with regards to sacraments. We noted that sacraments were a visible way of experiencing the promise that Jesus made to his disciples (and us) and it called us to make sacrifices in ways that reflected Jesus' sacrifices. The sacraments called us to "give up" something...which is where I added a third word to the understanding of sacraments, and that word was/is, "mystery." I explained that sacramental mystery is not the kind that keeps us from knowing about God, but it is the kind that draws us closer...always, infinitely, CLOSER. It's like the hint of a spice in food that makes us want to taste more. It's like the combined smells on a person's body that makes us want to get to know them better. It's like the dance of light in the clouds that takes our breath away and wonder how God made those colors.

Paul complains (without merit) that those who look to Moses have forsaken the "drawing closer" mystery in favor of "living behind a veil." He says in his second letter to the Corinthians: "**13** *We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. 14* *But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.15* *Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.*" Paul is saying that those who have not

come on board with Jesus have closed themselves off to God. They have shut out the new life Jesus offers by their dismissal of a “new covenant.”

While I confess there is a lot to explore in the new covenant that Jesus came to offer, the mysteries Moses poses are also infinitely deep. There is loving God. Loving neighbor. Keeping and exploring sabbath...and more!

Were Paul and those who get mired in the Law seem to fit Paul's complaint, is when the teachings about God become ‘prescriptive’ rather than ‘descriptive.’ When the mysteries are codified into laws or directives I believe that they lose their power to draw us into a deeper relationship with the Holy!

Our sisters and brothers in the United Methodist Church are up against that challenge this morning. They have created a Book of Discipline that dates back to 1784 (with minor changes every 4 years) and it has served in its time a particular population. It is not a bad book, but it hides behind a veil the riches of God's mercy and the still speaking voice of God's spirit which offers new insights and mercy to us each and every day. The Book of Discipline is both law and doctrine for United Methodists, and in its present incarnation it includes a section on homosexuality that, in short, is against it.

The Book of Discipline prescribes as Law, as Doctrine, human teachings that echo debatable understandings of minor teachings of Jesus. And when I say “minor” I mean, he didn't teach on the subject of homosexuality at all. But his followers were apparently asked about the subject--they felt a need to comment on it--and as folks who were close to Jesus, they felt they knew

his mind. They declared homosexuality as “immoral,” “against God’s teaching.”

- These were the same men who declared, “Let’s build a booth” when Jesus was transfigured.
- These are the same men who pushed the children away from Jesus because they weren’t important enough.
- These were the same men who complained when Mary poured precious oil on Jesus’ feet in celebration of his presence.

The list goes on--and we could easily add to the list with our own misconceptions (we too are *very bold!*) but what would be tough to misconceive is Jesus’ extravagant love and acceptance. No rule could contain it or prohibit it from being expressed during his life--how much more so is it abundantly among us as we gather with him at table in his resurrected form???

The Confirmation class declared a sacrament as a promise, and Jesus promised us to be forgiven, to extend God’s love to us in the context of this sacred meal.

The Confirmation class declared sacrament as sacrifice, and Jesus gave his life so that we would have that love of God always, whether we could see him or not. We could experience God’s caring whether we were alive or not.

I think Paul is on to something when he proclaims: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all,*

who with unveiled faces contemplate[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Unfortunately, even those of us who subscribe to Jesus can be found guilty of wearing a veil. We choose the blinders because they feel safer than glimpsing the larger picture of God's glory that goes beyond our understanding and prejudice. We wear our veils so that we can see what we know we can see...and not be troubled by the things that challenge our present understanding of the Holy. We wear our veils at a pretty hefty price of missing what God is directing us to witness.

It need not be that way. There is freedom to be had that is as close at hand as the elements on this table.

Jesus' Spirit is present in our sacraments. He is here in ways that are mysterious and call us to further contemplation about how this can be so. Why can this be so. How wonderful that this is so. As we sacrifice our preconceived ideas of his intent and come to accept the holy gifts inherent in the sacraments, we are changed. We are drawn into the image of the One who claims us as their own. We become more aware of the extravagance of God's love for us and those around us. It is a powerful love. It is the stuff of promise and sacrifice and mystery.

As I am inviting our confirmands, so too I invite you to embrace these gifts that open our eyes and bring us closer to God, in Jesus' spirit. Amen.