

Face to Face

II Corinthians 3:18; 4:6

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 14) 2021

Kyle Childress

I'm so glad to see your faces! It's been an incredible and overwhelming month but today, I'm here, Jane is here, and you all are here, and you're smiling (I can see your crinkled eyes above your masks). And as you can plainly see, I'm smiling back at you.

Seeing each other face to face is no small thing, and it is especially encouraging to me!

The Apostle Paul tells us in II Corinthians, "With our masks off, our faces are shining with the glory of God, as we reflect God's glory to glory through Jesus Christ, and are transformed into God's image... It started when God said, 'Let light shine out of the darkness,' who has shone through our hearts and lives the light of the glory of God through the face of Jesus Christ" (II Cor. 3:18; 4:6).

Paul is referencing the Exodus story back in Ex. 34, when Moses is coming down from Mt. Sinai after meeting God and receiving the 10 Commandments. The people have been worshipping the golden calf and because of their sin, Moses must wear a veil, a mask, because his face shines with the glory of God. Without the veil, the reflected glory of God, would be unbearable for the sinful people and they would perish.

The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthian church, because of Christ, the veil, the mask, is removed and we are being transformed by God's glory. We can see the glory of God in each other's unveiled faces.

When we are the church, when the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, and as we practice living like Jesus, over time, our faces more and more resemble our creator. And part of our transformation happens as we see each other face to face.

Seeing each other face to face is a big deal.

Another biblical story. Way back in Genesis 32 Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau, whom he cheated many years before. Jacob is afraid, with good reason, that his brother will try to kill him. The night before the meeting, Jacob wrestles through the night with a mysterious figure – a man? An angel? Godself? We don't know for sure. Exhausted and wounded the next morning, Jacob names the place Penuel, which means "the face of God." Jacob says, "I name this place Penuel because I have seen the face of God" (Gen. 32:30).

Jacob limps fearfully to meet Esau. Instead of a battle, Esau runs to Jacob and embraces him. Jacob exclaims, "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God!" (Gen. 33:10).

Somehow Jacob connects his deep struggle with the living God with meeting his estranged brother. As we know God more deeply, we recognize God in each other. At the same time, as we know each other more deeply, we begin to see God in each other.

Let me encourage you to pay attention as you read Scripture. Sometimes it is translated as “face” but other times as “sight” or the “person” of God, and in the good ol’ King James, the “countenance” of God, as in my benediction every Sunday. However it is translated, it is a variation of “panim,” the same word Jacob keeps using over and over and why he named the place Penuel.

Every time we gather for worship, we could name this place Penuel. After months and months of locking down and keeping our distance, seeing each other face to face is like seeing the face of God. As important as being online is, (and we are much grateful for our online ministry), when we are face to face, when we are in the flesh with each other and with others, we know the difference. We know there is something of the Living God we know in Christ happening. It’s a Holy Spirit thing.

Personal, in the flesh connection is essential in our faith. We know and strongly agree, that in a pandemic, we need to wear masks and be careful. We know that online ministry is essential, just like telemedicine and tele-counseling and online teaching, and other virtual ways we go about our daily lives in order to stay safe and protect others. But we also know that from time to time, when possible, there is no substitute for face-to-face contact. And anything personal makes a difference. Handwritten notes and cards to each other is an enormous encouragement, phone calls, and so on. And when possible, meeting for coffee or sharing a meal or walking in the park together, all are ways God works in and through our lives helping us to grow and encouraging one another. And it does not have to be in a crowd. One other person face to face makes a difference.

When I came out from surgery the very first thing I saw was the unveiled face of Jane with her gleaming smile. And immediately after that, I saw the smiling faces of Emily and Callie – and it was like seeing the face of God.

Emily and Nick’s wedding last week, not only would not have happened without your involvement, but your involvement is the one place where my “pastor-mode” broke down. You all cooked, brought food, hosted showers, the rehearsal dinner, sent notes, bought gifts, ran errands, hauled equipment, set up tables, took down tables, hauled tables, decorated, took down decorations, over and over. In various ways you showed up face to face.

My “pastor mode” broke during the early part of the wedding service, when Rev. Lorraine Brown asked the bride’s family to stand and say our vows. Jane and I were on the front row, and I turned slightly and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ruth Carroll standing with her gleaming, smiling and crying face. I turned a bit more and there you all were standing as part of the bride’s family. You stood because you are the bride’s family. You raised Emily. As Darrell Adams sang and reminded us, we are all part of the “family of God.”

And so are all our children. Raising these children, these babies is all our responsibility – face to face conversations, and personal involvement of one kind or another over years.

As many of you know, a few weeks ago, Judith Cooper’s long-time, close friend, Teresa, died from an aggressive form of brain cancer. (I tell this with Judith’s permission.) The last few months of her living and dying has were marked

by the deep friendship and involvement by Judith and other very close friends who cared for Teresa face to face.

Over the last few weeks, Teresa talked with her friends about how to die and God and angels caring for her and being with her. Joanna, a Catholic lay-minister friend would come by and share the Eucharist and pray. And even though the tumors had caused Teresa to lose her sight, Teresa said of Joanna, “I see a light around her.”

And as Teresa was dying, Joanna entered the room and commented, “There are so many angels here.” Teresa was wrapped in the prayer quilt our church sent her and was also wrapped in a blanket of support and prayer from our Wed. night Women’s Bible Study group.

There is much more I could tell, and perhaps Judith will share with you if you want to know more. But I want you to notice the connection between the close personal face to face friendship and being in the presence of God and of angels. The Apostle Paul says we are being changed from “glory to glory” which we can see with unveiled faces in each other.

Pay attention, look at one another and others – look for the face of God. Look while working at Helping Other People Eat (HOPE). Look at Village Nac. Look at Bible study, look at our children and help them learn to look.

In March 1958, monk Thomas Merton was running errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. He had been a monk over ten years, immersing himself deeply and consistently in the life of prayer. On that day, he made the connection.

He wrote: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun” (from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*).

We are all walking around shining like the sun. We are being changed from glory to glory, face to face. Hear me on this: God is at work and we don't give up.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.