

## The Face of Jesus

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”  
-- 2 Corinthians 4:6

The transfiguration of Jesus is one of those moments in the Bible from which the majority of us come away saying, “My, my, wasn’t that something,” -- which completely misses the point.

The transfiguration, like everything else in Jesus’s life, is primarily about us, not about him; that’s why it’s in *our* Bible and never was in his.

The transfiguration is a vision for us, just as it was a vision for those disciples who first experienced it, presumably on a mountain. But the meaning – the significance – of a vision is never what happened then; it’s what happens now and continues to happen as more and more people share in that vision.

The transfiguration, that moment of extraordinary light, is an ongoing vision of the face of Jesus, the Christ, who gives us, again and again, those “Aha!” moments of insight into God’s being and will for the world, or to use Paul’s words, which are today’s text, the transfiguration is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Now, the theological road becomes bumpy at this point, and more than one turnip has rolled off our Christian truck as we’ve talked about Jesus’s relationship to God. Let’s slow down and proceed with a certain degree of caution.

To speak of the knowledge of God being known to us in the face of Jesus Christ is not to announce our religious chauvinism. It’s not to say that since Jesus is the image of God, everyone else – non-believers, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and so forth – are all mired in soul-damning confusion.

It is possible to interpret Christ as the image of God that way if you want to – and many Christians *have* wanted to – but that’s nothing more than preserving – or even aggravating – a conflict we see in the New Testament. We’re making the fight we see among first-century Palestinian Jews our fight, which it most certainly is not.

We’re not ancient Jews from the eastern Mediterranean squabbling over the question, “Is he or isn’t he?” with he being Jesus and the question being whether or not he’s the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for the Christ. For us, for Christians, that’s no longer the question. The conversation’s moved on for Christians, or at least it should have, which is why I wouldn’t fit as the pastor of a church dedicated to proving the identity of Jesus as the Christ, and why I don’t support, for example, those Christian groups dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity.

A liberal Christian church, such as this one, takes it for granted that Jesus is the Christ – otherwise we wouldn’t call ourselves a Christian church – and then such a church asks the question, “So what? What does it mean for us as a congregation, for me as a member of this congregation, to affirm that ancient teaching of the church?” In the Latin

phrase of the Reformers, “What makes the affirmation of Jesus as the Christ the gospel *pro me* – for me?”

And here’s where we need to take another look at the story of the transfiguration, and remember that it’s not primarily about Jesus. It’s primarily about Jesus’s disciples – the old ones, way back then, and the new ones sitting here this morning – and asking ourselves what they saw, how they reacted, in what ways they were changed, and why any of that matters to us.

The transfiguration isn’t an historical oddity, like a museum specimen in a glass case. It’s a declaration of the power of self-giving love. That’s the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ that Paul speaks of. Self-giving love is what makes Jesus the Christ. It’s not his chromosomes or the manner of his birth or even the nature of his resurrection. Those are simply signs, symptoms even, of what we might call his “pre-existent condition,” which is his hearing the voice of God calling to him and his decision to respond to that call.

Self-giving love, not for just a few but for the entire creation, is what makes Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the image of God, the Son of God – they’re all referring pretty much to the same thing.

And the witnessing of that way of life by his followers, and the transforming power of that way of life on them, is what allowed them – us – to hear a divine, eternal voice say, “Listen to him.” His way of life is *the* way of life, the only way of life that is guaranteed to work for all people in all places for all time – you have my word on that, thus says the Lord.

To see in the face of Jesus the image of the creator of the universe, is to see in him infinite self-giving love, infinite mercy, infinite power, and infinite hope. God gives God’s self to us and to all creation in the gift of existence itself, and how we respond to that gift – and not our endless wranglings about this or that point of doctrine – is the true measure of our faith.

I didn’t make that up. I take it from Jesus’s own words as found in the Gospel of John, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Abundant life is the good news of the gospel – that’s what the Greek word *euangelium* means, good news – and that’s what that fraught word evangelical means – the good news of abundant life in Jesus the Christ, the image of the living God. There’s nothing in that word evangelical to be afraid of if you know where it came from and what it actually means. It needs a lot of rehabilitation in twenty-first century America, and we’re just the sort of people to undertake that work.

And that’s what we’re doing when we teach the Bible in this church, when we serve Loaves and Fishes to the hungry, when we write letters to our congressional representatives as a Bread for the World Covenant Church – we are being good-news, Christ-centered, evangelical Christians.

We’re trying to live out the good news that abundant life is possible, in this life, for everyone because we believe that God’s goodness is for everyone, no exceptions. We believe that God’s desire is for all of us to be able to share in that goodness. As we’ve sung since childhood, “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” and not just a little privileged piece of it.

And those little bits of privilege scattered around the globe and through the centuries are there not because God has privileged them, but because we have, because we’ve put our affairs together in such a way that a tiny few of us benefit vastly while many others of us struggle to benefit at all.

The world is begging for justice, not just in the distribution of its material resources, but also in its spiritual resources. The world is pleading with us who have – or

at least claim to have – abundant spiritual resources, to use those resources to make the goodness of God more real for everyone.

This coming Wednesday, I'll be part of a panel discussion with other UCC folks about the importance of reminding our congregations that racism is by no means a thing of the past, not for us in this country and not for many people around the world.

The particular piece of this large complex of thoughts and feelings and actions called racism that I'll be talking about is racial privilege, which is the unequal distribution of social benefits based on race. Privilege is what George Orwell was referring to when he said in *Animal Farm* that "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

Most of us in this congregation understand that blatant discrimination is wrong, but it's much harder for us to see how privilege – especially white privilege in our society – blinds us to the more subtle forms of racism. Let me show you what I'm talking about.

A few weeks ago, the Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts showed us what white privilege looks like when it's played out on the ground among ordinary people just like us. It happened like this.

Police in Kalamazoo, Michigan, were called to the scene of a middle-aged white guy standing in the middle of the street, waving a rifle around, and hurling insulting words and gestures at the police who responded. For forty minutes, police negotiated with the man, eventually seizing his weapon and taking him into custody. He was held overnight, determined to be no threat to himself or others, released the next day, and given his gun back.

Now, compare that encounter to what happened to Tamir Rice less than ten miles from here. A twelve-year-old African American boy produces what looks like a gun, police are called, and the child is shot dead less than three seconds after the cops arrive.

What's the difference? Good cop in Kalamazoo, bad cop in Cleveland? Perhaps, but many of us believe that what lies behind the cops' perceptions of threat and training in how to respond to that threat, in both Kalamazoo and Cleveland – and in many other places in America – is white privilege, giving white people the benefit of the doubt in uncertain and potentially dangerous situations, while withholding that benefit from non-whites.

Withholding that social benefit of doubt is withholding a goodness, and withholding a goodness is not to live in the image of God, who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on all of us alike, as Jesus reminded us and called us to emulate.

The transfiguration, friends, is first about us and only secondarily about Jesus. The transfiguration is the vision we see – or don't see – of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ that transfigures us, that changes us – from ordinary Peter, Andrew, James, Mary, Kathy, or Barb into the daughters and sons of the living God, who has no one race, no one gender, no one class, no one sexual orientation. God has them all, welcomes them all, and loves them all.

If that's the love you see when you look on the face of Jesus the Christ, whether you're on your spiritual mountain or in your spiritual valley, well and good.

If it's not – keep looking.