

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ 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.

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

"Face Off"

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

"It sounds like science fiction!" No, I'm not talking about Jesus' transfiguration in front of his disciples or even of the appearance of the long dead Elijah and Moses. I'm sure that the newscaster on the news program I was watching about ten days ago didn't mean to be dismissive of, or rude about the very personal nature of the story she had just shared. If not science fiction, the recent face transplant for which there was a press conference on February 3rd is, at least, close to miraculous and is around the 18th since the first was performed in 2005 for a French woman, Isabelle Dinoire; Connie Culp, in 2008, received the first in the USA. To read details of these procedures—well—it sounds like science fiction.

In a 1997 film by John Woo, John Travolta and Nicholas Cage swap identities in a

movie that bears no resemblance to *Parent Trap*, *Freaky Friday*, or any of the scores of its take-offs. In this startling suspense thriller, Travolta's character assumes the identity of a criminal who killed his son six years earlier. In what seemed at the time to be science fiction of sorts, doctors remove the bad guy's face and transplant it onto the good guy so that he can glean secrets from the bad guy's brother. The twist comes when Nicholas Cage's character wakes from his coma and forces doctors to perform the same surgery on him, in reverse.

Little did we know in 1997 that eight years later surgeons in France would carry out the first real face transplant, and successfully. The woman had lost her nose, lips and chin after being attacked by her own Labrador retriever while she was unconscious following an overdose. I recently reread some of the articles about this amazing surgery, and learned a great deal—some details of which perplexed me. “Doctors stress the woman will not look like her donor, but nor will she look like she did before the attack - instead she will have a "hybrid" face.

‘Psychologically, she has totally accepted her new face. Her return to smoking is not the best thing. But that's what she wants to do – we can't stop her.’

It may be that the most significant challenge that Miss Dinoire faced wasn't whether or not her own tissue would someday reject the transplant, or whether she would regain entire muscular control of her mouth. Would the transfiguration of her face offer her the hope for a healthy and lengthier life? Would the transfiguration of her face offer her a corresponding transfiguration of her hope and her faith? Joe Dimeo, the 22-year-old man who has just received a double hand transplant as well as a face transplant has, as the saying goes, “his whole life in front of him” now. Having now read several articles about Isabelle Dinoire and Connie Culp, I pray that this young man will know a strong faith in himself and in God; in the core of his being that is illumined by hope.

You don't need to know all of the details of the film I spoke of earlier in order to know that it isn't all about the gruesome details of surgery or even of mistaken identity. Some of the most interesting aspects of the plot have to do with the characters' searching how it is that identity is created, and whether it has anything to do with our actual countenances. We are also meant to take from this a good moral lesson. We can be changed physically, but it is our internal selves—maybe

we can even say our souls—that substantively indicate who we are.

It may sound strange, but these were the kinds of stories that I had imagined when I was a child and heard the story of Jesus' transfiguration. In Luke's version of the transfiguration story, we are told "the appearance of Jesus' face changed." In Matthew we read how his "face shone like the sun." What does that mean, I wondered.

I guess I still wonder, and I also find myself thinking quite a bit about how it is that the gospel will always be a mystery to me. Both of this morning's scripture readings have to do with the shining of God's light, and I believe that when we allow ourselves to admit it, our belief in the transformative power of the gospel is sometimes limited. Because we enter onto paths, many different paths that are established by what we may call the "gods of this world," as Paul puts it, and we are therefore blinded to a degree; we are not quite able to see the entire light of the gospel. If this is disturbing to think about, well, I am not going to apologize, because I am reminded periodically of just how powerful the message of the gospel is and has been to people other than myself, and I know that *I* only tap into this kind of exhilaration periodically. I wish for all of us the comfort and true assurance that comes with a *powerful* faith.

I have had more than a few conversations even since arriving here last month about what it is that compels a person to faith in God, or even to faith in humanity. I recently found myself remembering a friend from seminary who, with her husband, had come from Hong Kong to study—against the wishes of both their families. Wing Yee shared with me a four-part film series called *The Cross: Jesus the Christ in China*. She predicted I could not watch it without having "the tears on my face," and she was right. I only watched the first part, which tells the stories of several house church leaders who were arrested and imprisoned. During the Cultural Revolution, Christian leaders were forced either to join a state-sponsored church, or to apostatize their belief in Christ as Lord. Many of these people were imprisoned for decades because rather than publicly renounce their faith in Jesus Christ, they would allow themselves to be imprisoned. Although there is now greater freedom of religion, the only legal church continues to be the state church. So, these same leaders continue their ministries in homes.

The tears that escaped from my eyes while watching the movie had nothing to do with the trials that these people experienced. My tears sprang from a sense of sharing in their total exultation. In their faces I believe I saw the true glory of Jesus. I went looking in Camden this week for the journal of my trip to China to bring my younger daughter home, interested to remember the experience of worshipping there. My mother was seated rows in front of me because the church was full to overflowing. People made room for me to sit in the back with my new daughter, Emma. At one point in the service, which alternated between English and Chinese, my mom looked back at me, beaming with a smile shining with tears—meeting my own. The fact that God was visibly present in this place, moving the people to sing their praises, was profoundly moving. Despite a level of want that is unfamiliar to *any* of us, there was joy. The faces of the worshippers and the leaders were transfigured.

And so were their lives. Their lives were transfigured in such a way that they carry on *joyfully*, every day, believing that *all* that they are and can accomplish here and now is only a tiny measure of what they are—and will be with Christ, forever. So, what can our faith do to transfigure our lives? How will our faces reveal the incredible change that our belief in God incarnate can do for us? How will our lives reveal what it means that God loves us so much that God would walk among us, even suffering as humans suffer? Imagine what things will begin to look like in China when the mutual sharing of resources among Christians spreads with the faith. Imagine what things would look like in China if even the legal authorities treated one another with loving mercy.

Wait! Let's try this again: What would this transfiguration look like *here*, and why don't we see it entirely, now? Somehow, despite Jesus telling his disciples not to share the news, we know about how his face was transfigured and how God revealed that Jesus was his beloved son. How can we reveal what this knowledge means to us? We can live in such a way that God's glory is revealed in *our* faces, and in *our* lives. We can be the people who live out the law of love—not only in our immediate families, but also in the growing family of Christ—all God's creation, throughout the world. Be careful, though! A lived faith on this order may require something of us beyond what leaves us physically comfortable all the time.

We won't be imprisoned for our beliefs. Because we live where and when we do, we can proclaim our faith publicly and name all that we do to be a reflection of that faith. Yet, Jesus does ask that we be countercultural, and for many of us, this is the rub in an otherwise peachy religion. Those of us who are a bit left of center in our political and social views may think that the religious right has cornered the market on Christian faith proclaimed publicly. This is not the case, however.

We bear testimony to something we can truly *experience* through powerful, outward looking love. When we gather up for ourselves, our faces rarely beam, but nowhere are faces and lives more apparently glorious than when they are reaching out to others, and doing so in Christ's name. Because Jesus did just that, we also can be transfigured—into something fully human, which means fully in God's image: loving, gracious, and merciful. It *is* a countercultural mission, and it is a difficult row to hoe in a culture that invades every aspect of our lives if we let it. We have to make conscious decisions to allow ourselves to be transfigured, to be transformed. That is when our faces, too, will shine with the light of God's love and God's glory in us.

Let us pray: Lord, we pray today to be transfigured by your love for us. May we be your light in the world, supporting your reign with our every action, every word, every breath. Amen.