

LOVE LIFTED ME
II Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Paul makes a remarkable claim in our reading from Second Corinthians. He says this: “And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” With such a sentence, we see how Paul gets a reputation for being “hard to understand”, as II Peter 3 admits. But packed inside these words is a profound but simple truth: the Spirit of Christ changes us gradually over time. We are not stuck where we are. So there is hope for all of us—an amazing claim.

The background here is important. First, there is Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai after talking with God as it were face to face. So Moses’ face shines so brightly that the children of Israel ask him to veil himself to shield them from this dazzling light. Second, there is the story of the Mount of Transfiguration ably presented by our Readers’ Theater. On that mountain top Jesus shimmers in light as he stands before Peter, James, and John. In Luke the disciples are reduced to silence at what they witnessed. In Matthew they fall on their faces and are filled with awe.

Paul takes the response to the shining Moses and the glowing Jesus as a clue to what happens to us. When we behold the glory of the Lord, we too are transformed. When a veil is removed from our minds so that we see God’s presence in our midst, we are changed. Gradually our lives begin to reflect some of that brightness found in the faces of Moses and Christ our Lord. This is not self-generated light. This is light shining off us. We are more like the moon, less like a star. Reflected light, as from a mirror.

Paul is convinced that when the blinders are removed, we see like we have never seen before. It is so like what happens when you have successful cataract surgery. Remarkably you begin to see everything clearly.

So too over time we are changed so that we begin to penetrate the clouds all about us. We begin to see Christ more clearly. The world becomes charged with the glory of God. That’s what happens when we begin to see with “unveiled faces”. We are transformed gradually into the likeness of Christ from “one degree of glory to another.”

Think of Paul blinded by the light of Christ on his way to Damascus. Eventually he receives his sight and then his vocation to be an apostle of the Risen

Lord. Paul changes dramatically so that he begins to reflect the light of Christ. It is an amazing transformation.

Perhaps we have not had such a vision. Few have. A precious few witnessed the glowing Moses descending from Mt. Sinai or the shimmering Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop or the Risen Christ standing on the roadway. But most of us have experienced the transformative power of love. The light that shines into our hearts is indeed a love that has made all the difference in our lives.

Yesterday Sharon and I went to see a movie filmed right here in New Mexico. "Crazy Heart" is a movie about an alcoholic country western singer. The producer and one of the characters in the movie is Robert Duvall, who once starred in perhaps my favorite movie about an alcoholic country western singer-"Tender Mercies". It's an old theme but still a powerful theme-how the love of a good woman transforms a self-absorbed entertainer into a caring human being.

"Crazy Heart" shows the singer "Bad Blake" drinking his whiskey and smoking his cigarettes and playing his music. There are four marriages in his rear view mirror and a 28 year-old son who won't speak to him. There are broken friendships and frayed relationships with former musical partners. And there are one night stands at dives and bowling alleys and with women whose names he can't quite remember. The story is old but it is told well and acted incredibly well. The fifty seven-year old Bad Blake driving around in his beat up van comes to represent everyone you have ever wanted to just slap up side the head. You simply want to ask him point blank, "Don't you know any better?"

Then along comes a woman, Jeannie, who with her four year-old son Buddy, live in Santa Fe. She is a reporter who interviews Bad Blake after one of his performances. And you know from there on out how the story goes. Now this washed up old performer has someone to care for-not only Jeannie but also Buddy, who wraps the old singer around his very young thumb. And they care for him, even nurse him back to health after a car wreck leaves him with a broken leg. It all looks so promising-except for Bad Blake's unchanged lifestyle-the alcohol, the cigarettes, the musical one night stands.

Then something happens-let's just call it a wake up call for Bad Blake. A very serious wake up call, but I won't ruin it for you. And Bad Blake realizes he simply must change; he must dry out and he must get sober. And not just for himself. But also for any chance he may yet have with Jeannie and Buddy. It's about the power of love to change a hard living, careless man into an authentic human being.

And by the way, there's no sloppy finale that ties up all the loose ends. It concludes on a poignant note, very real. But it's an ending that reminds us again of love's astonishing capacity to change us and transform us. It's about going from me and me alone to someone else and what they need. The world grows larger,

brighter, and more beautiful-all because of the power of love to get inside us and change us.

In the face of love, life looks so very different. It is not bleak. It is not hopeless. It is not forlorn. Life embraces us and invites us into a feast of sharing. On this Valentine's Day, it is enough to remind us again that "love is patient and kind, it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." In short, love is transformative. That's what Bad Blake learned in "Crazy Heart". And that's what life teaches us every day we draw breath. "Love never ends."

I grew up singing the old Gospel hymns. Like many of you when our choir sings an old standard, I know all the words by heart. There is an old Gospel hymn written by James Rowe in 1912 entitled "Love Lifted Me". It was based on the story of Jesus walking on the water and then Peter attempting to follow suit. Peter's short walk ended up badly and Jesus reached out his hand and lifted him to safety in the boat. The words go like this:

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peace shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.

Then the refrain kicks in:

Love lifted me!
Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me!

The last verse brings us home:

Souls in danger, look above, Jesus completely saves,
He will lift you by his Love, out of the angry waves.
He's the Master of the sea, billows His will obey,
He your Savior wants to be, be saved today.

I think it is a song Bad Blake could sing. "Love lifted me. When nothing else could help, love lifted me." It is a song many of us can sing, with deep gratitude. Whenever our "crazy hearts" think all is lost, to this we can cling, "When nothing else could help, love lifted me."