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“In Whose Image? (A Sermon in Three Parts)”

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Children’s Sabbath

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 16, 2011

Exodus 33:12–23; Psalm 99; Matthew 22:15–22

Time with Children

Part I: In Whose Image Are You Made?

When I was a little girl, people used to say that I looked like my father,
and I always hated that as a child.

Now I loved my father, don't get me wrong,
but I didn't really care to look like him.

He was tall and athletic in build, and he had beautiful blue eyes.

That part was okay.

But the part that I couldn't get past was that he had hairy arms and legs,
and a hairy face, and freckles everywhere – he was covered with them,
and he had bushy eyebrows that looked like patches of wild grass on his face.

And I kept thinking – do I look like that?

How am I supposed to go through life as a girl if I look like that to people?

I used to think that it was God's cruel trick that I looked like my father,
and that my two brothers more closely resembled our mother.

Who does your family say you look like?

Who looks like their mother? Who looks like their father? How so?

How does it make you feel to look like them?

In the song we sang when you marched in today, we sang,

"All glory, laud and honor to Thee Redeemer King."

The people who saw Jesus said that he reminded them of a king.

They thought God was like a king, too.

Do you know why?

They didn't think he was a king because of the way he looked

because Jesus never wore royal robes or a crown, did he?

And God, no one knows what God looks like.

They thought God and Jesus resembled a king because of the way they ruled,

because of the way they used power.

God and Jesus were kingly leaders because they were holy – set apart from the people,
not just one of the crowd;

because they ruled with kindness over ALL of the people, not just some of the people;

because they ruled over ALL of the nations, not just some of the nations;

because they didn't show favorites with people or nations;

and because they ruled with justice, and did what is right.

They were fair.

So, if we want to resemble anyone, we should resemble Jesus,

who didn't look like his father, but who acted like his father:

holy and fair, not playing favorites,

ruling over and with everyone in just and right ways.

Time with Youth

Part II: The Imperfect Image

Did you happen to see the movie last year, *The King's Speech*?

Did you like it?

Just as a reminder, it is a true story about an Englishman, Bertie,

otherwise known as His Highness Prince Albert of York,

second in line to the British throne behind his brother, Prince Edward,

who doesn't think he has any cause to worry about ever being king of England

because he is second in line, and because he does not fit the image of king.

He doesn't have what it takes to be king: he's nothing like his father, King George V,

he is terribly shy, and he has a debilitating speech impediment—
not just a mild one, but a full-blown speech impediment,
which causes him to swallow whole syllables sometimes without producing a sound.

Bertie is a stutterer, and kings, as a rule, don't stutter, do they?

The triple crisis in the story comes when his brother, Edward, abdicates kingship after
serving barely a year with World War II looming on the horizon.

And Bertie must face his own tongue-tying demons,

as he is suddenly is thrust into the unwanted position of King George VI,
king of the whole British Empire now at war,
and undertake the daunting task of making a public speech to encourage and inspire
his fearful and anxious constituents.

Does God call people to tasks for which we are not properly equipped,
and must our image be perfectly matched to every task to which we are called?

That's the question.

What did you think about that movie?

Were either Bertie, the reluctant King, or his speech pathologist, Lionel Logue,
equipped for the task to which they were called?

Was their image right for their calling?

That's the question for Moses, too.

History supposes that Moses was a stutterer. Did you know that?

We know that Moses was a reluctant prophet, feeling unworthy to lead the Israelites
out of Egypt.

But did you know, too, that Moses was thought to have been a stutterer?

He worries that neither Israel nor Pharaoh will listen to him

and heed his words, because as scripture says, he

“speaks with faltering lips.” (Exodus 6:12)

He confesses to God, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent,

neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant.

I am slow of speech and tongue.”

To which God replies, “Who gave humanity a mouth?

Who makes someone deaf or mute?

Who gives sight or makes someone blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (Ex. 4:10)

And in today's story, he is looking to God again for assurance

that he will be able to lead "these people" who are proving to be increasingly stiff-necked, stubborn, and unwieldy to manage as the journey to the promised land drags on and on.

And God says, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (v. 14)

But Moses wants more than a promise of presence and rest;

Moses wants to see the glory of God's face for encouragement and inspiration.

Like a child looking for a parent's smile of approval before venturing into new territory,

Moses wants to see the glorified face of his Creator,
the one in whose image he has been cast.

And Yahweh God, who respects Moses more than any human being on the face of the earth,

who has actually spoken to Moses face to face, as one friend to another,
deflects this request by Moses,

allowing him only a glance of his backside.

(We used to call this Moses' theophany, in seminary, theophany meaning

"a manifestation of God.")

I'm sure Moses left this encounter totally baffled, wondering if he is the "butt"
of some cruel cosmic joke.

The image of God, in which Moses and all of us are cast,

apparently must not be found in some singular ephemeral visage

but in the direction to which God deflects and redirects Moses next—

towards God's words and back towards God's people—

stiff-necked and stubborn though they may be.

Which makes me wonder if the glory of God is not to be found in one single face,

but rather in God's Word being made manifest by a crowd of faces,
a collective manifestation of God's image.

One of the preachers who I grew up knowing well as a youth in Charlotte,

Doug Oldenburg, was a stutterer, too.

He wasn't a great preacher, in form.

He would get stuck on a word, fumble for it, unable sometimes
to move forward with a thought.

Because the rhythm of his phrasing was often lurching, interspersed with irregular pauses,
none of us could fall asleep during his sermons, even if we wanted to.

Quite the opposite, he fashioned his congregation into a group of faithful,
steadfast listeners, whose eye contact and body posture let him know
that we were hearing him into speech,
silently coaching him through each line of thought,
prayerfully awaiting the goods that we'd come to receive:

God's Word made pertinent to us.

Because... those words, which comprised the content of Doug's sermons, were great
and well worth the communal anxiety of bringing them into our presence.

If we could get past his stuttering, the content of Doug's speech was spectacular.

And God used Doug in remarkable ways, even as a stutterer.

He served as President of Columbia Seminary and as Moderator
of the PC(USA) General Assembly, among other things.

In whose image are we made?

Does that image have to be polished to perfection in each one of us?

And how is God's image made manifest in our life together? Amen.

Time with Adults

Part III: Whose Image Is On You?

In today's couplet of lectionary texts,

the secret word around which they seem to hinge is the word "face."

This brief exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees is nothing but a word snare
set by the Pharisees to trap Jesus—

kind of like the Republican debates of this past Wednesday night.

They want to undercut his popularity, take him down in the polls,

make him trip over his tongue, reassert their superiority over him.

So they play him with flattery, luring him with three compliments:

You are true. Yes? You teach the way of God, which is true. Yes?

And... here's that pivotal word... you do not regard "the face" of anyone. Yes?

In other words, you are not swayed by a pretty face, Jesus, right?

You don't play favorites. You don't show partiality? You are fair to everyone?

These are all proper theological assertions.

But the question with which they then try to hook Jesus is a political question,
not a theological one: Is it right to pay taxes to the emperor?

What they really are saying is this: whose image is on you?

In whose mold are you cast?

Do you bear the imprint of the world or do you bear the imprint of God?

It's actually a very good question.

And to answer their question, Jesus holds up the "face" of a coin,

which bears the image of the emperor Tiberius, with an inscription
ascribing divinity to the emperor.

And he says to them, literally, give back to the emperor the things which belong to him...

(and I can imagine Jesus placing the coin in the palm of one of their hands
and folding their fingers tightly around its cool, silvery surface)

... and give back to God the things which belong to God.

(and perhaps he gestures to them with his empty palms up,
as if this is all that he has left—himself!)

Jesus doesn't deny that believers have some allegiance and obligation
to the local government

but implies instead that our political allegiance and obligation is limited and subordinate
to our primary deference to God,

whose imprint is not just an object we can cradle in the palm of our hand

but whose imprint is embossed upon our very hearts, as Jeremiah 31:33 attests.

And, if I read between these lines correctly

and read between them using my kingdom lenses, as John Calvin suggests,

I would venture to say that the imprint of God,

the image of God that marks us and sets us apart,
is not a singular image, like the emperor's stiff portrait,
or a perfect image, like that of some airbrushed smooth-talking supermensch,
but rather it is a corporate image, a collage of all of our faces attuned to God's Word,
which together, in community, in God-family, reflects the glory of God.
Like our bulletin cover today and last Sunday, God's image upon us is a collage,
a composite of all of God's holy people,
who are neither Asian nor Caucasian, neither the help nor hostess,
neither male nor female nor transgendered, neither old nor young, adult nor child,
neither abled nor disabled, neither gabber nor garbler,
neither penny-rich nor penny-poor.

All of God's holy people together, bearing loving witness to God's holy word,
reflect the glory of God's image.

Isn't that what God was trying: turn Moses' face to notice?

Isn't that what Jesus is trying to convey with the flip of a coin?

Rebecca Leonard keeps telling me, "I'm into collages. I make them all the time now."

I think she's on to something important.

God is into collages, too. And we are God's beautiful collage.

As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once said,

*For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

So may it be,

that our congregation, our whole and holy constituency,
be blessed and empowered to reflect together
the brilliant image of God's glory. Amen.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*,
ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie, London: Oxford University Press, 1967)