

Veil Sermon

February 14, 2010

2nd Corinthians 3:12 – 4:1

Luke 9:28 - 36

I think that Milton Berle was probably the first to do it. You know the old bit – large man, usually an ugly man, dressed like a woman for the pure laugh of it. Since then, the Three Stooges have done it, Tyler Perry, Eddie Murphy, Tom and Jerry. It is also a plot device – the Senator escapes the Press who has him trapped in the movie *The Birdcage* because a group of drag queens dress him up like a large woman – in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, Will Shakespeare is able to get an audience with the queen because he is dressed like a chamber-maid. Classically this set us plays and musicals and tried and true gags. Even our very own David Sessoms dressed up like Cher at last years talent show, and let me lend my voice to say that he looked good – though a bit clumsy in his heels.

The standard set up for this bit is of course is the wedding ceremony. The bride is fully veiled. Completely obscured from the groom. The ceremony goes forward and the vows are shared and the marriage pronounced – You may Kiss the Bride – the minister says, and when the young woman unveils herself she has chest hair, a beard, and is anything but feminine. In the real world there is nothing funny about marrying the wrong person, but in slapstick it is a good bit. A bit made possible by the obscurity of the veil.

I'll confess that I don't spend a lot of time thinking about veils. I don't really understand them. I don't know what they are for. Veils have fallen out of vogue in my lifetime. As a pastor, I have officiated 70 or so weddings now, and I cannot remember one traditional veil. Brides just have moved past them. Hair clips - yes. Up-do's - yes. Do-up's - yes. I have even seen a couple of hair-don'ts where I was left wondering, "What is she thinking?" But I have not seen many veils in the "my face is partially hidden or obscured until the moment I am given away in marriage" sense.

I am not smart enough to know why this is the case. Feminist mystique? An idea which has come and gone? The word "veil" doesn't fit in with the rhyme - "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue"? Not stylish enough? Like I said, I am not hip to fashion in the least. That I can even spell "fashion" is accomplishment enough. I just know that I don't see them any more. Thus, I rarely think about them.

This might just be a mistake. For one, they are quite the cause for disdain and conflict in the current era -- particularly in France. Haven't heard about this? Then Google "veil controversy" and see what happens. There was an article from 2006 that I found in researching this sermon, [The Veil Controversy](#), which appeared in the conservative journal *The Weekly Standard*. A little research *unveils* that the controversy has only gotten worse. Western governments see the veils as a huge security threat – masks are not allowed, for example, in banks or in Federal buildings. Why couldn't someone with ill intentions simply dress as a woman and then, just like the old gag, pop out and become something entirely different. Turns out that many cultures like veils, even say they are a religious requirement. Western women find the idea, generally speaking, distasteful and repressive. The women who wear them say they are symbols of devotion, and they are liberating. Suddenly, veils don't seem so easily forgettable.

I'll never forget sitting in one of my Doctor of Ministry classes down in Atlanta. The course was on the intersection, conversation, and clash between Islam and Christianity. One of the class sessions was meeting a man originally from New Orleans. He had not gone to church as a child. And met a woman, an exchange student from Iran, at the University of New Orleans when they were students. One thing led to the next and soon they were married, he was a follower of Islam, and they were living in Tehran.

When I met him he was an importer of Persian Carpets and rugs in Atlanta, having been back in the United States for a number of years. He brought with him his 21 year old daughter, already attending Emory Medical School to become an Obstetrician, to help the women in her community in Atlanta have healthy pregnancies and babies. Beautiful girl, spoke four languages – English, Arabic, French, and Farsi. She was poised and collected. And you guessed it, she wore a Hijab, one of the styles of veils or head coverings that Persian women wear. Not the Burkha, which is the complete body covering and the style of veiling where one only sees the eyes, but her head was covered, and she could quickly wrap the bottom around to cover most of her face if she thought she should.

First question posed by a commanding woman, a Presbyterian Pastor from Nashville, TN: “Do you like wearing that Hijab?”

“Yes.”

“Don't you find it restrictive?”

“No. It is liberating.”

“How so?”

“It reminds me of who I am, which is the most freeing thing of all. It protects my dignity because it keeps strange men from staring at me in inappropriate ways. It tells the world what I belong to before I have to say anything – it is freeing.”

“Don't you feel though it makes you an object?”

“No,” she said, “letting young girls parade around half dressed and tiny swimming suits at the pool and beach, that makes girls into objects.”

It was a fascinating conversation, one that I will never forget. She also talked about traveling the world, about the power that she thought her faith gave her, and about what it was like to live with an arranged marriage, a husband who was chosen for her that she would meet and marry when she turned 25. Yes, she thought that this gave her a freedom as well – freedom from worry as to whether she would ever marry or have a family.

Needless to say, it was a peering into another world. A world that on a first glance had been veiled to me my entire life.

On second glance though, one wonders what veils we all wear as a means of protection, as a means of identity, as means of expression – that is why, in her words, she wore her veil after all.

At its core that is what Paul is writing about today in 2nd Corinthians: the veils that we wear by choice or circumstance. What is happening in our Bible is a rather technical argument about the law of Moses and the new covenant of Jesus.

Just as people will hide behind a veil of smoke, or under a veil of disguise the Apostle Paul thinks the people of God are hiding under the veil of the law. The very law that God had given the people to free the people from ignorance – laws that ordered life, and gave structure to society, law like the 10 commandments – has become the very thing

that obscures the grace of Jesus Christ. “Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds.” The fault that we fall into is using the law of God like a veil of protection from wrongdoing, a bargaining chip for protection. (“OK God, I am going to make it all through the day without lying because you told us not to lie, and I really want to not lie, and I know that because I won't lie you will not let my girlfriend break up with me and break my heart” – this is overly simple, but it makes the point).

And the truth is, there is no real truth in this. All of our bargains with God, to use God like protectorant or a deodorant fall short of the prize of grace. God calls us to drop the veils – the things we believe hide us from God and the layers which obscure God from clear vision – and simply learn to rely on Jesus. If you'll listen closely to it, you'll find a gem of scripture, a beautiful affirmation: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.”

To be sure, we all wear veils of protection, masks of our identities. We think these veils protect us from unpleasant encounters and from risks – and soon these become the way we think the world is. Like security blankets. When you were a kid, did you have a security blanket? I bet life got more interesting once you left it behind. For all the security it provided, generally speaking they usually just keep us scared and in bed.

I wonder what veils of protection we wear?

I started to make a list of mine -- 401K, Pension Plan, ADT Security System, dry-cleaning, and I stopped writing at around 20 or 25. The list was getting so long I wonder how I ever see anymore?

Isn't it time to drop the veils?

If you doubt this morning that God intends that we see clearly, that God wants the veils removed, then listen to that Transfiguration story from Luke again. Jesus could have been Jesus in technical terms just hiding out in Nazareth. But that is not the way of God. God is not really a “behind the scenes” God. God drops veils. God wants us to see and know the truth – and the truth is that we hide behind what we want to hear, and who we think we are, and the way we want life to really be. Just like those Corinthians long ago, we gotta let the veils go.

I came across a veil dropping story in my reading this week. I am nearly finished with the little book *10 Things Your Minister Wants To Tell You* by Buzz Thomas. At the half way point of the book he tells about going to New Orleans, a young Christian on a quest to save somebody. He saw a man, bearded, leg-less, drunk, surrounded by beer cans lying on Bourbon Street. “That the man,” he writes, “That's the man God wants me to witness to.” So he bends down – “Excuse me, you know God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you life.” Thomas writes the following:

The man was on me like a snake. His meaty hand caught my shirt at the collar and pulled me down into the stench of his breath. I watched with horror as the other hand reached into a pocket and pulled out a knife. He flicked it open and held it against my throat. Until then I had been squirming like a bug under a chicken's foot, but when I felt the steel on my exposed throat, I stopped moving. “You Christians,” he spat, “You come down here with your tickets to heaven telling drunks like me how much you love us and how much God loves us, but you don't really care. You're a bunch of hypocrites. I

am alcoholic and homeless and I need a place to sleep tonight. Which one of you preacher boys is going to take me home?"

After finishes writing this story, Thomas writes, "Thus began the real theological education of Buzz Thomas. Not at the hand of a learned minister or rabbi, but at the hands of a homeless guy."

Sometimes if we don't take the veils down willingly, the Holy Spirit rips them off for us. Like the young minister on the streets of New Orleans who needed his veil removed, Jesus brings Peter and John and James to the mountain top to have their veils removed. As Jesus unveils his glory, they begin to see. Oh, do they see!

My friends, God is calling us to drop the veils and let the security blankets go. And if necessary, let them go again. And again. And again. And again until the abundant grace of God frees us and makes us reflective of glory.

In the end, God will unveil all truth and all things – this is our faith. Why wait to the end? Why not begin to see today?

Blessings as you unveil your lives. Blessings indeed.

Amen.