

Re-removing the Veil

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Gordon Wiersma

Text: II Corinthians 3

I wonder what it would be like to believe exactly the same things as I did 5 years ago – or 10 years ago – or 15 – or 20... I wonder what that would be like, to keep believing exactly the same thing, because that's not how it goes for me – I find that what I believe, how I understand things, what has truth and integrity and resonance to it, changes – changes over time, at certain moments, sometimes gradually, sometimes quite abruptly. I believe differently than when I was a child, a youth, a young adult, a seminary student, a newly ordained pastor, a married person, a father, a co-pastor, a divorcee, a remarried person, a step-father, a 30 year old, 40 year old, an almost 50 year old! – different even as a fan of Calvin College and then a fan of Hope College! - At all those ages and stages, in those changing circumstances, what I believe has changed.

Now whether that resonates with you – “yes, that's right, what I believe is always changing also” or concerns you – “wait, what I believe doesn't change! – what you believe shouldn't change!” – let me qualify this just a bit...in all the change of what I believe and the truth I know, there are things central to faith and life, about God and love and purpose that are enduring – things that are a grounding, a foundation, that remain. So, while I began with change, really here as with many things there is a polarity – an inter-play of what changes and what endures that is always in motion. And what that helps me to see is that what I believe and how it

changes is in fact connected far beyond my personal ages and stages – it connects back into the generations of family and society - back into my denomination and to the Reformation and to Scripture - back into centuries and millennia. As I connect back along far through time, there are a whole series of things that I encounter and say ‘that’s not what I believe any more’ – and a whole set of beliefs that I find to be essential and enduring - at the heart, the foundation, of everything that I believe. I know that’s a broad stroke and wide view but it seems to me that’s something of the way it is for all of us.

So as I’m making my way toward today’s texts – and I will get there, I promise! – that’s one of the things I wanted to put out there to help us engage with the scripture today: what changes and what stays the same about our beliefs. And then there’s one more thing – and that has to do with old and new. It seems to me quite clear that we live in a culture that is enamored with the new and biased against the old. New is the best way to attract people to consider and accept something, and old is the best way to dismiss or discredit; new is interesting and attractive – old is irrelevant and unattractive; new is progress, old is outdated; new is hopeful, old is tired. And you might be thinking – ‘now wait a minute’ about some of those new old assumptions and characterizations – but for a moment let’s just acknowledge the strength of this message we hear - as part of this culture we are conditioned all the time to think of ‘new’ as better and best, and ‘old’ as worse and worst.

OK – so those are my 2 things to put out there for us today: the process of beliefs changing and enduring, and the tendency to flock to the new and desert the old. And why those 2 things to ponder? – well, it seems to me that these dynamics are very much a part of what is going on

for the Apostle Paul in the passage we heard from Corinthians. What Paul expresses can be understood in terms of these issues both for himself and for the community he is writing to – how to face the tensions these issues raise and how to live faithfully even as those tensions continue.

Just think of the life of the Apostle Paul in terms of his beliefs changing and enduring. You want change? – Paul can tell you about change – changed in what he believed about God, about himself, about his life. Paul's story is of a strongly committed follower of Judaism, and in that mode of belief he was a fervent persecutor of the fledgling Christian community...until suddenly he changed – his encounter with a blinding vision of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus; we hear about veils in Exodus and Corinthians - well Paul had his own personal veil of blindness in his conversion encounter and then sight returned as he becomes a part of the Christian community. Paul's beliefs change, coming to see Jesus as the Messiah of Judaism; and Paul's beliefs about himself change – that he is now called to tell the story of this Christ so that others will believe. So it becomes Paul's ongoing mission to interject himself into communities precisely as a belief-changer – into both Jewish religious communities and secular Greek/Roman communities. The letters of Paul have to be understood as being to communities that are in turmoil about changed beliefs – because such change most often does bring turmoil; these are communities, people, individuals, excited about and upset about and in conflict about and seeking deeper understanding about what to believe and what is changing – in turmoil about what changes and what stays the same.

There's a whole lot of belief and change going on for Paul and the communities he is addressing - and that's what brings us to the new and

old issue. There is a very important phrase that we read in the Corinthians passage today – Paul makes a reference to “the old covenant”; Paul is referring back to the story from Exodus, of Moses’ face shining with the glory of the LORD and Moses wearing the veil to shield the people of Israel from that glory – and so then Paul makes an analogy from this story for his situation: Paul says that for some Jewish people their remains a veil when they hear “the old covenant”. Alright, so, before we try to mine out something from this passage, just take a step back and ask yourself, when you hear “old covenant” – do you hear “old” as positive, or negative or just neutral? Well, I think we all hear it as negative – it’s simply our conditioned disposition that when we hear “OLD covenant” we assume something about it being outdated or inferior or expired. When we hear “old covenant”, our first impulse is to think old is bad, or at least worse – new is better. But that’s not what it says here – when Paul speaks in v.14 of the old covenant, the problem he says is there is a veil that prevents seeing it properly; and again in v. 15 it says that when Moses (the old covenant) is read, there is a veil on their minds. The problem is the veil, not the old. An interesting thing I found about this passage, this is the only time in the entire scriptures that the term “old covenant” is used – this is not some common catch phrase that uses “old” in a critical way. And knowing that challenges us to stop – to pause – and realize the goodness and fullness that ‘old’ can be – old can mean time-tested, full of wisdom, reliable, enduring, experienced, mature, strong. And that is what the old covenant is here – it is the life-giving law of Moses – it is the story of God’s salvation. The old is good - the problem is a veil of misunderstanding. So, Paul says ‘when one turns to the Lord,

the veil is removed' – in Christ one can see with clarity the covenant, the promises of God.

And then this: 'now the Lord (Jesus Christ) is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' Now THAT is a fascinating verse – perhaps the simple profound thing in it is this: what is at stake for Paul in the gospel is freedom – freedom from sin, from fear, from brokenness, from division, from ignorance, from despair, from death; freedom to love, to forgive, to heal, to hope, to grow, to live – freedom is the covenant of life. And then the more complicated profound thing is this: Paul is talking here about the need to turn to Jesus Christ, because for Paul, for those he preaches to, for all, in Christ one can see God and the truth of God's life-giving promises (freedom) – and yet, as he does so, Paul says the Lord (Jesus) is the Spirit (God), and where the Spirit is, there is freedom – so, while Paul is talking about turning to Jesus, he at the same time says that what is most deeply at stake is that the Spirit of God is always at work to bring freedom – that's how it has always been and will be, in the old, and the new. THAT is fascinating.

So perhaps I better just put on the brakes here and wrap things up, as this sermon is in danger of getting way too long – and just tell you what I'm getting at. My belief in God as the life-giving Spirit of Christ bringing freedom for me and for all is a foundation of my faith that does not change – I am so grateful for that gift of faith in my life and I pray to grow ever deeper in that good news of Jesus Christ. What HAS changed in my belief is to think it is necessary for me to walk up to a Jewish person, or a Muslim person, or any person of sincere faith or conviction and tell them that I am right and they are wrong - and not even that I don't have to walk up to them to say that, but even that I don't have to

think that or believe that. And I'll tell you why – it's because of Paul; Paul who maybe would believe a bit differently than I do, but Paul who knew and expresses that what really is at stake is freedom – Paul wanted deeply for people to have the freedom from and the freedom to that Paul was given in Christ. And in his time Paul had this good news to tell, to share – the good news of Jesus Christ – freedom from and to for all. I have that same good news of Christ, but my time is different – in our time the issue is not a veil of misunderstanding just for my faith compared to others, it is to discern wherever there is a squelching of the life-giving freedom God gives. For my faith of Christianity, for other faiths, for people who live in brokenness, there are veils of misunderstanding that need removing, and re-removing, and re-re-removing again and again – the need to change what prevents seeing the life-giving glory of the Lord. Which means too, in our time, that Paul points us to the belief that stays the same – that wherever we see the Spirit at work to bring freedom, there as followers of our Lord, we can give thanks for the glory of God being shown. Whatever faith or person it is, if what is happening in and through that person is freedom from sin, from fear, from brokenness, from division, from ignorance, from despair, from death; freedom to love, to forgive, to heal, to hope, to grow, to live – then I know that the veil is being taken away, and as a follower of Jesus Christ I can give thanks – the glory of God is being revealed – and I can join with my part, the Spirit at work through me for such freedom as well.

It has been necessary and good for what I believe to change – and that's because as a follower of Jesus Christ there is the good news of freedom at stake that remains the same. There is much in what I believe that is old and new – some things to keep, some to set aside, some still to

discover. So for us in all that changes and stays the same, all that is old and new, in the words of Paul we can simply say this: it is by God's mercy we are engaged in this ministry, and in our time we commend ourselves with this truth to all in the sight of God: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom' – thanks be to God wherever and in whomever God's Spirit is at work. AMEN.