

Images of Grace – Exodus 33:12-23

I mentioned in my article for the Thanksgiving Newsletter (excellent newsletter – if you don't have a copy yet then ask for one after the service or access it on the website!) an experience I had at a meeting of the Vancouver Public Art Committee. This is a City of Vancouver committee that is responsible for selecting the art that will adorn our new building and commissioning the artist who will perform the work. While it is that committee that decides, we do of course have significant input into the process and we are working with Barbara Cole, a consultant who is very adept at this process.

The Art Committee became very excited over this project, recognizing it as an opportunity to do something quite significant. However, it was a comment that Barbara made that signaled to me that she had not only been listening very carefully to our wants and needs and desires but also that she had really caught the essence of what we are trying to accomplish. This signal came in the form of a comment she made, declaring that she was trying to imagine how to provide an image of grace that would be represented in the art.

Barbara's comment about images came to my mind immediately when I read the passage from Exodus that we heard a few minutes ago, describing Moses' encounter with God. You have to have some feeling for poor Moses – he was in a tough spot. He had urged the Israelites to follow him out into the wilderness, claiming to have been told by God that this was what he was supposed to do. Things had not gone particularly well on the trek, with the people mumbling and grumbling aplenty along the way. Beset by hunger, and thirst, and all of the perils that are normal in a nomadic pilgrimage across desert lands the people were losing confidence in him as their leader, and so Moses confronted God asking initially for the details of God's plan. God's answer, "meh, don't worry about it, I'll be right there with you" was not exactly what Moses was looking for and so he pushed a little harder, asking to see God's glory.

Well, the answer to that request was no more satisfying as God declared "I will do what I can – I'll pass my goodness in front of you, I'll give you a name you can use, I'll be gracious and show mercy – I can show you my face but then I'd have to kill you!" God then follows with some instructions for Moses (and the inspiration for a famous Fanny Crosby hymn) to hide in a cleft in the rock where he will be protected. All of this occurs, and Moses still does not get to see God directly.

This leaves us feeling a bit uncomfortable, doesn't it? If Moses in all his interaction with God was not able to directly see God, how then can we possibly see God – or more significantly know that God is real? We do have some relief, however, since as Christians we believe that there was a way for people to see God, namely in the person of Jesus. "The Father and I are one" Jesus declared, and we believe that Jesus is thus a physical incarnation of God in the form of a living, breathing person who could not only be seen but touched, bringing not death but life from that seeing and touching.

However, the time of Christ walking the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea was long ago and far away, and so we are still left with wondering, like Moses, how we can see God who leads us. The answer to that wondering is also found in our faith, as we profess that in our believing we are in Christ, but perhaps more importantly Christ is in us and that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a Christ-like life.

However, that raises a really disturbing thought, doesn't it? If Christ is in us, then we are the images of God's grace and mercy that people can see. What are those images? What God do we present in those images? This is quite a responsibility and seems like quite a burden to be the

screen upon which God is displayed for all to see. How can we ever begin to fulfill such a challenging task?

I think the first thing we need to do is to relax a bit and have some faith. We are not the ones who will generate these images – it is Christ and the Holy Spirit working within us who will do that, provided we give them the freedom to act. Our role is to listen and to respond, to hear the grace and mercy offered to us and then to respond in like ways.

The second thing we should note is that the images of God that we present are not still pictures but movies. We are not – or at least should not be – frozen statues. The image of God is not a static picture, but a dynamic happening. This is an essential part of what God was saying to Moses – “I can show you my glory in action; I cannot show you just my face.” Some artist will have the really difficult task of trying to represent the dynamic image of God’s grace and mercy using a static media of imagery on a building – we have the difficult task of displaying the dynamic images of God’s grace and mercy in our actions. People will not see God in our appearance, they will see God in our actions.

We sometimes or even often think of grace and mercy as nouns, as things that can be dispensed like medals or pills, but both grace and mercy are more properly thought of as verbs – we ‘do’ grace, we ‘do’ mercy. What specifically are those actions that provide the images of God’s grace and mercy? A great starting place is to hear what God’s ultimate graceful action – Jesus – had to say: “Love God with all your heart, and love one another as you have been loved.” The actions of loving kindness are at the heart of providing those images, but again we ask how do we describe or name those actions. Loving incorporates a number of definitive actions, for example accepting. Not tolerating, but suspending judgement and accepting others as also being individuals whom God loves first. Loving also means including, deliberately bringing others who feel themselves being outsiders into meaningful and positive relationships. Loving of course also means providing help, offering support, bringing companionship and comfort to those who are needing either physical or emotional or mental or spiritual relief. For a more complete list or user’s manual we can turn to Paul’s first letter to the congregation at Corinth, in Chapter 13 of which he provides an excellent and comprehensive outline of how to put God’s love into action.

So, how can people see images of God’s grace? They can of course see them in art forms, in paintings and statues, but more importantly and more usefully they can see the images of God’s grace in us. Yes, that is or can be a frightening responsibility, but that panic is eased by our recognizing that we do not bear that burden alone – we have the company of other faithful people to reflect those same images, but more importantly we have the reassurance that it is Christ acting in us who makes the images possible. Our task is to accept the grace and mercy offered to us, and then to reflect that grace and mercy in our actions and in our words, that others may see God’s grace and mercy also.

Thanks be to God for that mercy and grace, and for the Holy Spirit who makes it all possible.