

Revealing God's Glory Through Action— Exodus 33:12-23

I hope that many of you have had a chance to see the artwork glass now that has mostly been installed on the new building. This artwork is the result of a City of Vancouver requirement that new buildings must contribute to public art – either through the donation of cash to the City or by incorporating the art into the building. Bosa chose the later option, and we went through a process with the Vancouver Public Art Committee to select an artist and approve a proposal. Some of you may remember my angst at the beginning of this process as I declared that the City was not going to place some winged bicycle goddess statue in front of our church! However, it all worked out well with the help of Barbara Cole, a consultant who is very adept at this process, and the result is stunningly beautiful!

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.

I recalled Barbara's comment about images when I read our reading from Exodus describing Moses' encounter with God, and the way that God's grace was presented to Moses. You have to have some feeling for poor Moses – he was in a tough spot (and some days I can really relate!) 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 could 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.

Does this not leave you feeling a bit uncomfortable? After all, 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 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.” Michael Lin, the artist, nailed 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 through patterns of implied motion that cause our eyes to follow – 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 usually think of grace and mercy as nouns, as things that can be dispensed like medals or pills, but we should more properly think of both grace and mercy as verbs – we ‘do’ grace, we ‘do’ mercy. But what then specifically are those actions that provide these 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 your neighbour 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 merely tolerating others but instead suspending judgement and affirming others as also being individuals whom God loves. Loving also means inviting and including, deliberately bringing others into meaningful and positive relationships, helping them to no longer feel outsiders and rejected. 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, this gives us a whole new dimension of how people can see God's grace, doesn't it? Of course God's grace is revealed in art forms, in paintings and statues, but more importantly and more usefully God's grace can be and should be recognized in us. Yes, that is a frightening responsibility, but as Jesus says, “fear not” ... our panic can be eased as we begin to understand 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 and the Holy Spirit acting in us who make 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.