

*Based on 2 Corinthians 3:17 – 4:2. Commending Our Conscience*

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*, Jesus says, according to the Gospel of Luke, as he begins his public ministry. *God has anointed me*, Jesus says, *to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.*

Three years later, on this Transfiguration Sunday, having been wildly successful in his mission in Galilee, Jesus lands on the mountaintop at the edge of Judea, with Moses and Elijah, the ancestors of his faith. A *transfiguration* occurs. Meaning a *metamorphosis* or a *spiritual change*. An *integration* we could say, of the covenant love of Moses with the prophetic witness of Elijah. And Jesus is *radiant!*

An integration of covenant love and prophetic witness, Jesus confirms on the mountain of Transfiguration, means the mission of *good news to the poor* must be both about raising money for the Martinsburg Mission on SouperBowl Sunday and about pointing out why people are poor in the first place and working to change it.

The mission of *release to captives*, Jesus confirms, as he integrates covenant love with prophetic witness on this Transfiguration Sunday, must be about both bringing a Bible study to a prison and about pointing out racial inequities in our criminal justice system and working to change them.

The mission of *sight for the blind*, Jesus confirms, as he integrates covenant love with prophetic witness on this Transfiguration Sunday, must be about both the inclusion of people with disabilities in our ministry and about pointing out inequities in our public health system and working to change them.

*Freedom from oppression*, Jesus confirms, as he integrates covenant love with prophetic witness on this Transfiguration Sunday, must be about both the inner spiritual work of staring down our own demons and about pointing out injustice in civic and social and religious relationships and working to change them.

For three years Jesus has preached and taught and healed and cultivated a movement around this founding mission statement in Luke's Gospel, with great success. But now, transfigured as he has become, integrating the covenant love of Moses with the prophetic witness of Elijah, Jesus commits to doing one more thing: non-violent direct action in keeping with his mission, smack dab in the heart of the public square. And we all know the rest of the story.

Twenty years after the Transfiguration, an emerging community in Corinth struggles with the same founding mission of Jesus, guided by the vision of the Apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul emphatically calls them out for their failure to be faithful to the mission, especially when the privileged wealthy neglect the poor at the communion table. You cannot even get it right among yourselves, Paul is saying to them. How can you expect to call for change in the world beyond yourselves!

The Corinthians take Paul's admonishment to heart. In Paul's second letter, which is our lesson today, he commends the Corinthians for reclaiming their mission since the disastrous circumstances of the first letter. Well done, Paul says. You got your mission back. But do not rest on your laurels. Take it one step further, like Jesus did. From this glory to an even greater glory. *Lift the veil*, Paul says. The one with which we protect our fears and our hurts and our misgivings and our lack of knowing. *Lift the veil*, Paul says. The one with which we

keep ourselves from seeing the fears and hurts and misgivings and lack of knowing of our neighbor, whom Jesus tells us to love in the same way we love ourselves.

Do not be afraid to lift the veil, Paul says. No matter the cost to your pride. Or to your pocketbook. For *where the Spirit of the Lord is – unveiled – there is freedom.*

Lifting the veil of vulnerability is what the Social Justice Committee of our congregation has asked the Session – and by extension, the congregation – to do, in discerning whether or not to endorse a resolution urging both West Virginia Senators to vote for the Build Back Better Act.

We need to lift the veil, the Social Justice Committee is saying, so we can see the faces of children in poverty as if they are sitting right beside us in these pews, because in fact they are. We need to lift the veil, the Social Justice Committee is saying, so we can hear the heartache of parents who cannot support their children because they cannot remain employed without affordable childcare as if they are sitting right beside us in these pews, because in The Way of Jesus, they are. We need to lift the veil, the Social Justice Committee is saying, so we can carry the oxygen tank required for breathing by a miner disabled by black lung, as if they are sitting right beside us in the pews, because in Christ, they are.

We need to lift the veil, the Social Justice Committee is saying, so we can assure the children of Marshall Islanders and other island nations far from our protected Shenandoah Valley they will literally have a homeland on the other side of climate change. We need to lift the veil, the Social Justice Committee is saying, so we can see the families of 900,000 dead in this country alone, disproportionately black and brown, and do our part to make sure it never happens again.

Make no mistake. The Social Justice committee is right to ask us to lift the veil. We should all give them great thanks for insisting the church Walk The Way of Jesus and not simply Talk The Way of Jesus. The question is not *whether* the church will respond to the prompting of the Social Justice Committee. The question is *how*.

There is a legitimate debate to be had – and the Session is having it – around whether or not SPC should explicitly endorse this or any other particular piece of legislation. As we engage this debate, I want to make sure we have a shared understanding of what it means for the church to make a social witness and the process by which the church makes that witness.

First and foremost, please be assured, the Session does have both legal and ecclesiastical authority to take the position requested by the Social Justice Committee. The separation of church and state – enforced by the tax code that governs our non-profit status – requires only that churches refrain from endorsing a particular political candidate or a particular political party. Churches can – and do – advocate public policy positions at the federal, state, and local level. This can include specific legislation, ballot referenda on a particular issue, and confirmation of political appointees (including Cabinet members and judgeships).

At the national level, for example, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has developed an extensive body of what we call “Social Witness Policy” on various concerns in the public square that we believe bear witness to The Way of Jesus. These policies guide our denomination’s social witness on federal legislation in Washington, DC, and on global politics at the United Nations in New York. Our denomination also files *friend of the court* briefs in judicial proceedings that reflect the social witness of the church. Just this week the national Presbyterian

Church (U.S.A.), the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the World Council of Churches (which counts the Russian Orthodox Church as a member body) condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and called for peace talks to take place immediately.

All of this is legally, morally, theologically, and biblically sound. Which leads us to the discernment of our Session – and by extension the congregation – on how *we* are called to make a social witness.

As I have said, there is a legitimate debate to be had around *how* we address the concerns raised by the Social Justice Committee, even if we agree in principle that they do in fact need to be addressed. What does it mean to make a prophetic witness in the height up hyper-partisan politics? Do we really want to perpetuate that partisan divide? How can “We Choose Welcome” in the breadth of its meaning and at the same time take a particular position that may or may not be agreed on by all? Should we leave legislative advocacy to governing bodies beyond the congregation and focus instead on more local efforts to address these concerns? All of these questions and more have been part of the process of discernment within the Session and from your comments as a congregation.

*God alone is Lord of the conscience* our Presbyterian heritage insists. One lone voice of conscience speaking its truth in a sea of opposing opinions may very well be the voice of the Spirit leading us in a more faithful direction than any of us could have imagined otherwise. Our Session has wisely requested you speak your conscience as they deliberate by writing to Dave Smith, Clerk of Session.

Our heritage also insists that no one of us can possibly know divine truth in its entirety. We need the wisdom of community to discern faithfully how it is the Spirit of God would have us move. And we must remain in relationship with one another, through mutual forbearance, in those places where we lack unanimity.

Every one of us is fallible, including every council of the church. The Session *will* make mistakes, on this decision or on another one. We already have and we will again. You can count on it. And God will correct us when we do. After all we are, to be sure, *A Church Reformed, and Always In Need of Being Reformed, according to the Word of God.*

At the end of the day, this is the work of the Session, in every way we lead the church: To *discern the mind of Christ* to the best of our ability. In community. Walking as best we can in The Way of Jesus. Integrating covenant love with prophetic witness as Jesus does in his transfiguration. And then voting our conscience, as we *commend ourselves*, in the words of the apostle Paul, *to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.*

And so with humility, lifting the veil of our vulnerability, trusting our ministry to the mercy of God, we do not lose heart, as we come down from the mountain with Jesus, on this Transfiguration Sunday, and journey toward Jerusalem.