

## Flawed Glass

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 (NRSV) *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> or in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup> For in*

*him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

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I CORINTHIANS 13:12 (NRSV) *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

The Word of God for the people of God...

At the western edge of Hannibal, Missouri is a restored antebellum mansion called, "Garth Mansion." It's a bed and breakfast hosted by a delightful couple whose hospitality is amazing, and Jo Lynn and I have enjoyed that hospitality a few times. My favorite room was the Samuel Clemens room. After he left his boyhood home, Clemens always stayed in that room when he returned to Hannibal for a visit.

When it was restored, every piece and fixture that was serviceable or repairable was retained, including the glass in the windows. It was old glass, imperfect by our standards. The light came through, and you could see outside—kind of. You could see colors and shapes: trees, bushes... and if a person walked by, you could tell it was human, though you'd not be able to recognize him or her—or even tell if it was a him or her. By our standards, it was "Flawed Glass".

That's the image that comes to my mind when I read that 12<sup>th</sup> verse of I Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror dimly." The mirrors in Paul's world were made from polished brass or silver and were noted for their wavy imperfections, like, I think, the windows at Garth Mansion.

That phrase has become a core of my personal theology, and my blog, and this sermon, are named, "Flawed Glass." Our vision is incomplete, which is why I resist faith statements that come across as absolute and infallible; statements that imply any other perspective is wrong. "We see in a mirror dimly... We know in part..."

The verse is tucked into part of Paul's response to one of many conflicts in the church in Corinth; specifically, a conflict over Spiritual Gifts. Apparently, a pecking order had emerged: "I have more gifts than you." "Maybe so, but my gifts are better than yours." The gift everybody wanted was ecstatic speech—speaking in tongues. Paul said it was the least important gift, because, unless someone interpreted, it benefited only the one speaking, and was useless to the church.

He encouraged the Corinthians to seek the Gifts, then shifted gears and said, "Let me show a still more excellent way: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*" (13:1)

The Spiritual Gifts: prophecy, tongues, knowledge are expressions of the temporary, partial nature of our faith. Faith is "seeing in a mirror dimly; it's knowing in part." Without love, the gifts are incomplete and impotent.

Ten years later, the passage from Colossians begins, "*He is the image of the invisible God...*" and it ends with, "*...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...*"

"He is the image..." An image implies something to be seen. In worship, in Scripture, in prayer and meditation, we perceive an image—a vision. But we don't see everything.

Sometimes in meditation I catch what seems like a glimpse of a fleeting, fading image. But it's never complete. It's conditioned by verses of Scripture I remember, lyrics of hymns and camp songs, bits and pieces of partially remembered sermons and Sunday School lessons. The images I perceive match the metaphors I recall. In those moments I sense a presence—an awareness; and it draws me into a momentary fellowship that rarely aligns with any tangible reality I know.

Sometimes in the study of Scripture I'm struck with a new awareness—a new way of understanding that makes sense based upon the accumulation of evidence gained through years of study and stacks of research; and so, I must state my faith differently. It's not a contradiction or a wishy-washy inconsistency. I believe it's growth. And yet, the very fact that I am growing—gaining new understanding—makes me aware of the possibility that even my new understanding may change at some future time, because "I see in a mirror dimly... I know in part."

Human faith always is partial knowledge; never complete, never absolute, and certainly never to be accepted as infallible.

So, here's that passage from Colossians: "*He is the image of the invisible God...*" That's not a new or even an unusual description of a relationship with deity. The Egyptian Pharaohs were called "the living image" of the supreme god. For example, the name Tutankhamen means "living image of Amen."

The Rosetta Stone, 200 years before the birth of Jesus, written in three languages: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Demotic script, and ancient Greek, decrees king Ptolemy V as "living image of Zeus". Within a few generations after leaving Egypt, Israel adapted the same concept, applying it first to the house of David, and later to that "ideal king"—that concept emerging after Babylonian exile: the hope of Messiah—not as "image of Zeus," but as "Son of the God of Israel, Lord of Heaven and earth."

So, when Paul says Christ is the "*image of the invisible God,*" it is a reference to historic precedent that likely had more meaning for those Gentile Colossian Christians than if he were writing to Jewish converts.

And then Paul doubles down by linking Christ with the creation of all things,

and connects with these Gentile converts by referring to the different levels of deities in their previous pagan religions: thrones, dominions, principalities, and authorities. He then drives home the point with the concluding statement, “...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...”

Paul was so confident of the ultimate reality of Christ that he had no hesitation in presenting the gospel to a wider context of human—even pagan—speculation. And so, he uses the language and thought patterns of the Colossian culture to move into this inspired passage that puts Christ at the center of the whole universe.

Connecting the dots: we don't see everything. Even with scientific research, even with theoretical Physics, even with the Hubbell Space telescope, we are discovering almost daily that to this point in human history we haven't seen everything—we don't know everything.

But if we see Jesus, it's enough! In John's gospel Jesus said to his disciples, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Paul writes, “...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...”

If we see Jesus, it's enough. Not the Jesus of Hollywood or of Baroque artists, remade into the physical likeness of the dominant culture. If those images are so dishonest in their physical appearance, what other inaccuracies and dishonesties might be hiding behind the white skin and blue eyes?

This statement, “He is the image of the invisible God,” most scholars think is the opening line from an ancient Christian hymn, whose lines include, “He is the head of the body, the church... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Christ is not a cosmic presence, transcendent in the sky, abstracted from the level of everyday life and accessible only to the spiritually elite; he is present in the church; and the reference to his blood grounds that image of the invisible God in an intersection with human history concretely and brutally.

If we see Jesus as fully as we can, given the limits of our dimmed vision, there will be ethical and relational consequences. Those who see Jesus, even in a mirror dimly, cannot remain passive and unchanged, but will be moved by his call to “follow me” into faithful and even sacrificial ministries of reconciliation. And in those ministries, our vision and our understanding begin to clear, a little.