

Year C—Easter 7

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

John 17:20-26

Shining Glory

Where have you encountered the glory of God?

Glory's not a word that we use that often.

It sounds stilted—

Something of a past era,

Belonging to heroic generals,

Gladiators,

Crusaders,

Chivalrous knights,

Or in Game of Thrones.

It's a characteristic of powerful men

(it's almost always men)

And strikes a militaristic tone.

It's associated with power,

Honor,

And might.

It conjures images of strength

And force.

It's all about the individual person.

It doesn't seem particularly "Christian".

The church, too,

Has been guilty of promoting this macho image of glory.

Just look at some of the most venerated Saints from our history.

There's St. George,

Spear in hand,

Suited in armor,

Killing a dragon.

Or St. Patrick,

The great Christian victor,
 Smashing pagan idols,
 “Cursing Kings and Kingdoms”,
 And driving all the snakes off the island of Ireland.
 Even the desert fathers
 Were icons of strength,
 Their iron wills able to withstand all temptation
 And all the hardships of the desert.
 It’s no wonder that
 “The glory of God”
 Has served as a rallying cry for people sent to war
 Or setting off to colonize new lands.

There are certainly times
 When the church’s vision of glory
 Looked no different than that of the rest of the world’s,
 But if we look at today’s reading,
 And John’s Gospel in general,
 We get a very different picture
 Of what God’s glory looks like.
 These are Jesus’ last words before he would be betrayed,
 Handed to the authorities,
 And put on trial.
 He speaks them in the form of a prayer to God—

“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus prays that as he shares in God’s glory,
 All of his followers,
 Those who were alive with him
 And those to follow later,
 Would come to share in that same glory.

In this case,
Glory isn't about power or strength.
It's not about destroying one's enemies,
Or being especially chivalrous.
The glory that Jesus is talking about
Is something subtler,
Humbler.
Glory isn't about being held in esteem,
Feared,
Or respected by others.
At its heart,
Glory is simply the nature of God being revealed.
It's what God is,
Indescribable,
Evading clear definition.

Throughout John's Gospel,
Glory is associated with the cross.
Jesus talks about the crucifixion as the moment he will be glorified.
Even more than the resurrection,
For John,
Jesus's willingness to die for those he loved,
For all the world,
Is the most glorious act imaginable.
In that act,
He takes the brokenness of the world onto himself.
He takes it with him to the grave,
Promising that through his death,
We'll all be given new life.
His glory is revealed through his love.
God's love and God's glory
Are inseparable—
They are indistinguishable parts of who God is.

Jesus prays that we will share in God's glory.
Just as God's glory was revealed to the disciples in him—

In his life, death, and resurrection—
 It would continue to be revealed in his disciples.
 Jesus prays that all people would be able to see him
 In the faces of those who follow him.

Where have you encountered the glory of God?

It's easy to focus on people who seem especially good,
 Or saintly, or holy and assume that's where we see God's glory.
 We fixate on people we deem "extraordinary" —

The Mother Therasas,
 Martin Luther Kings,
 Mohandas Gandhis

Of the world.

But in light of today's Gospel,
 I think that to focus our attention
 On people who seem so unlike us,
 So beyond us in holiness,
 Goodness,

Or significance,

Is to miss the point.

The body of Christ is not just those
 Who seem to excel in holiness.

The body is made up of all believers,
 All who attempt to follow in Christ's footsteps,
 However tentative and halting those steps may be.

The prayer that Jesus prays is not that
 His glory will be shown in the lives of a few exemplary individuals.

His prayer is that ALL of his followers

And all people

Will be united in the glory of God that he has made known to them.

The glory of God is present throughout creation.

It has the potential to shine through in all that God has made—

In boughs of beech trees dappled with light

Or the dark stillness of a spruce forest.

It's there in the sunrise and the sunset,
 In the lapping of waves
 And the clear waters of glacial runoff.
 And it is, I think,
 Especially present in human beings and the connections between them.
 In John's Gospel,
 The glory of God emerges through relationship.
 Jesus shares in God's glory because of their relationship,
 Because he was created by God,
 Loved by God,
 And sent to earth by God.
 And so his disciples are united to that glory
 Because of their relationship to Jesus
 And their desire to follow him.
 Glory is revealed in the connection.

When I think of where I've encountered the glory of God,
 So often it's in places of connection with other people.
 I've seen the glory of God in an armful of mandarin oranges passed
 Across a fence from an old Georgian woman.
 I've seen it in a grandmother raising her two grandkids
 When they're parents were not in a place to do so.
 It came through a trusted mentor reminding thirteen-year-old me
 That I was a beloved child of God.
 It was there last week in the laughter
 of a group of young Episcopalians from around the diocese
 Gathered together to share a meal and conversation.
 It was there after the Easter Vigil when the server at the Portsmouth Brewery
 told Nicole and me
 That someone had covered our first round of drinks.
 It was there when a community of nuns took a chance
 And let two twenty-somethings live alongside them for a year.
 I've seen it appear at countless meals—
 A dinner out with two men from another generation,
 All of us curious about life and faith,
 Connected through this community

Or a feast cobbled together from whatever was on hand.
It revealed itself on a walk with a former professor
As we named all the trees and flowers we could see.
It emerges in chance encounters and
Fleeting moments,
A smile from the person at the checkout counter,
A passing hello from a stranger.
The glory of God is not about feats of extraordinary holiness.
Yes, it can be present in those,
But it's about so much more than that.
Wherever there is love,
Wherever there is genuine connection with another person,
There the glory of God can be found.
Jesus prays that his followers "would become completely one."
His utmost desire for us,
Is that we become connected,
That we realize that none of us lives in a silo,
And that all of our lives are intertwined.

We are all invited to become
That vehicle for God's glory.
God working within us
Will shine forth in ways we may never know.
Who knows what passing moments
Or little acts of kindness
May reveal something of God's glory to the world.
We are all icons—
Made in God's image,
Capable of being a window to that glory for other people.
God uses all of us
With all the brokenness and messiness of our lives.
God shines through the cracks,
Outward to the people we encounter.

Our Gospel today is an invitation to connection,
To recognize that God's glory can shine through anyone,

And that Jesus' prayer for all of us,
 Is that we will see that glory at work in one another,
 And let ourselves be conduits of it—
 that it will unite us and transform us,
 drawing all people together
 And into the love of God.

I'm reminded of the final stanza
 Of a poem by a Russian theologian
 And poet,
 Vladimir Solovyov.
 In Russian it goes like this

Милый друг, иль ты не чувствуешь,
 Что одно на целом свете —
 Только то, что сердце сердцу
 Говорит в немом приветии?

My dear friend, can you not sense it,
 There is only one thing in all the universe—
 The silent greeting
 that one soul whispers to another.

Where have you encountered God's glory?

This weekend our nation suffered another tragedy—
 Twelve dead in Virginia Beach.
 I found myself dreading the conversations I knew would reignite,
 The same ones that follow every mass shooting.
 We need to have those conversations.
 We need to wrestle with how to curb the flow of violence in this country.
 We need to talk about access to guns,
 And the risks it poses.
 I wish I had answers
 About how to cope with a world
 In which violence of this magnitude

Is becoming normalized.

The world we live in is so far from the world of our Gospel—
 A world in which all the people of the earth are “completely one.”
 That kind of unity and peace feels like a pipe dream.
 But in a world so far from that,
 I wonder if we might take up the prayer that Jesus prays
 And pray that unity is possible,
 That God’s love would manifest
 In our midst and transform our world from within.

Like a garment being woven,
 Love heals one stitch at a time.
 God’s glory is revealed one connection at a time,
 One silent whisper from one soul to another.
 Maybe it’s naive to think
 That a 2,000 year old dream
 Can one day be realized.
 But I think that’s the heart of what faith is,
 A willingness to hope that what has never been can be,
 And that God is working in the midst of us.

Where have you encountered God’s glory?

Where have you seen God at work in the world around you?
 And how might God be seeking to work through you?

I pray that God’s love may continue to work through us,
 That we as individuals and as a community,
 May shine forth God’s love.
 I pray that
 We may be a part of the healing of this world,
 And that through us
 God’s glory will be revealed.