

Romans 8:1-11 - Matthew 13:1-9
Appearing to Be Christian or Being One
Elkton UMC - July 16th 2017

¡Sisters and brothers, buenos días! Would you please pray with me?

Holy Spirit, speak with us here and now. Holy Spirit, speak to us here and now. Holy Spirit, speak through us and speak in spite of us here and now. Amen!

Your mind might be telling you otherwise, but I can guarantee you that I am Carlos. For those who I had not met before, allow me to elaborate. I used to have a clean shaved face and very short hair. Since November last year, I decided to let my hair and beard grow –if you wanted to know what triggered such decision, I would love to share it with you later, in person-.

I never thought that a simple and superficial change in the appearance would help me see people’s interaction deeply different. I cannot tell you how many times I have not been recognized at first by people who I know for long time. “-Nice to meet you. My name is... wait a second. Have I met you before? Why do I feel I have seeing you?” –I just stand there smiling while they continued wondering- “You look a lot like a guy who lives in Dover”, I heard people say to me.

I have played complete soccer games with the same team I have played since 2008 and at the end of it some of my own teammates came to me and say “–Man, I was wondering who the hairy midfielder was. That accent sounded familiar but I didn’t recognize you with all the hair in the face!”.

Others, like my family from Colombia and closer friends, have been explicitly outspoken about the slow progression. “I don’t like it! You should shave it. You don’t like my brother. You look like Moses. You look like Noah. You look like Che Guevara –the Argentinian revolutionary from the 50’s and 60’s-. You look, you look. You look. The power of the image, my friends!

I have seen how the look conditions our interaction with others. On the top of that, if you added the multiple layers of race, socio-economic status and idea of “exclusive” sexual orientation, a lot of times the look becomes – sadly- the first and only superficial filter through which we are willing to engage with others. We, who have been created at the image of God – meaning with the essence of God’s love, compassion, grace-, are called to be in relationship with God and with one another yet that relationship is mostly corrupted by the superficiality of physical appearance. That tells a lot about how shallowed and scared we are at the moment to experience discipleship in the newness of God.

I will share with you, however, that this look did help when I played Jesus’ role on Maundy Thursday this past April during Holy Week. The service was graphically powerful, people said. Semi naked and covered with makeup that simulated blood all over my body, I walked through the aisle while carrying in my back a decent size cross and a thorn crown on my head. That image made the following lines alive: “Blessed are the undocumented, blessed are the refugees, blessed are the single mothers, blessed are the seekers of justice, blessed are the unhoused sisters and brothers, blessed are the peace makers because theirs is the kin-dom of heaven!” It was a beautiful service. I got crucified on Thursday night and on Good Friday my wife woke me up, gave me a list of errands to run and another list of items in the house for the Spring cleaning day. She didn’t even wait the three days until resurrection Sunday!

I consider that the two Scripture portions read today talk to us about the levels of commitment we might be involved at the time we want to engage in a transformative relationship with God and with our neighbors. Matthew 13 walks us through the first of six parables that Jesus taught to the crowd. He compares how the same water comes down from the above into the different surfaces where the seeds have fallen. That is the same word interpreted differently by our different hearts. On the other text, Paul writes to the Romans making a clear comparison by contrast about the differences between living under the law of death and the law of the Spirit.

It is clear for Paul that the law of the Spirit in Christ leads to life, to new life, that sets us free. But free of what? Free of sin. What sin? We cannot get a full understanding of the text if we first don't recall the context of Paul. We have to remember that Paul used to be Saul, -a persecutor, oppressor and killer of those who started following this Son of man named Jesus.

After his encounter with Jesus where he got blind, Paul rectifies his purpose is life and with his letters he tries to exhort the already followers of Christ to not take advantage of God's grace, to not let numb their spirit before the injustice we see, we hear, or the ones we are part of. He clearly says that because of God's Spirit has come Jesus like; we should follow and not even dare to give us permission to take God's infinite grace for granted.

The two ways of living are presented by Paul clearly in two paths; under the law of sinful nature that is centered in self or to live under the law of the Spirit that leads human kind into interconnectivity, wholeness and communion.

The latter is a law where your pain becomes mine and vice-versa. It is law of the Spirit that gives us life even when the complexity of its experience seems or looks strange to us. That is, for me, the difference between appearing to be a follower of Christ and being one. Appearing to be a follower of Jesus is based on self-righteousness; I don't drink, smoke, steal, I don't kill, curse and yet leads us into isolation and a condescending sense of superiority. Appearing to be a recipient of Jesus's Spirit is also based on what we have; I have this house, this car, this professional career, status. On the other hand, being one who follows the Son of Man and the Son of God is based on openness to transformation, sincerity, recognition of error – repentance-, and sacrificing my own privilege for the sake of the common good without expecting something in change.

Paul asks us to distance ourselves from the sinful nature of social indifference, personal apathy and hateful resentment that causes death. We can be death while alive: when we are fearful, selfish, discriminative and accumulating good we are in death mode. Paul says that faith rather than a passive force is in fact an action which seeks redemption and justice for all. Being a fallower of Christ is to live towards holiness as captives of right

doing without hesitation; the right thing to do is not done by an obligation of the law but because the love of God, who commands us so for the transformation of our spirit and the world.

It is a wonderful thing to be reminded by Paul –a former oppressor and now announcer of the Good News- that Christ came for all, no for one nation. Jesus came to precisely break down any human categorization that keeps God's creation from the relationship with the Creator in constant communion with the Spirit of life, not superficially but in depth life of togetherness and community.

No redemption from oppression would be possible without the incorruptible concept of God's grace. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, understands God's grace as a banquet that covers all humanity. In that sense, we are called to love God with all who we are. In general, the Bible narrates the story of how the creation, the fall, and the redemption of God's people are concepts lived in community through which consequences are both suffered and enjoyed by the whole. Therefore, as Christ followers, we should live thinking of, crying out for, and walking with those who are suffering, creating spaces where all life is moving toward its fulfillment. Are we having our hearts ready for such fulfillment?

What a better example to explain that fulfillment that John Wesley himself. He, who strongly opposed slavery and resisted against the abusive actions taken against children for the benefit of an industrialized economy, also opposed to respect and follow the leadership of women in the church. Susanna Wesley, John's mother, disagreed with the practice of education being given only to boys. She was the feminist of the family who has to be recognized today as the founder and Mother of Methodism.

She challenged what, until then, was considered Biblically supported: the belief that women should not be leaders of the church. The mother of the Wesley family opened her kitchen to teach young girls basic math, writing, and reading skills. This was a cornerstone to accept and honor women in leadership positions in Methodism. She emphasized the importance of conscience development through a systematic teaching that later became part

of John Wesley's methodology to check himself with God's purpose and God's holy grace.

Susanna Wesley's sense of community and service surpassed the church policies, creating a model of challenging the existing religious structures that continued with her son. John's initial rejection of women's leadership stopped thanks to Susanna who recommended John to not remove the first woman lay Methodist preacher from leadership in a class meeting. Susanna convinced John to listen to her preaching first and see if the Holy Spirit was at work. He went and after experiencing a woman leading, he determined that the Spirit was indeed at work and affirmed her ministry. How you found yourself in a similar experience?

That is the Spirit of life that we are invited to join, the one that transforms our stubborn minds and hearts because the law of the Spirit creates new life. The same water and seed came down from the above to Susanna and John Wesley but their soils were not equally prepared. Susanna's soil had space for roots to take place. John's seemed, appeared to be ready but was shallow. Only after an experience of liberation, John came alone to the other side of the fence.

How can our heart be transformed into being a follower of Jesus rather than appearing to be in one? I suggest you to enter into a moment of self-reflection and ask: in what place does my heart stand on? Is it the surface, in the path of apathy where birds come and eat the seeds away from me because I am closed? Or is my heart on the rocky place where the seeds cannot grow their roots and instead is filled with fear and lack of confidence? Or maybe, my heart is shocking the plants, family members, friends, and strangers around me because my heart is filled with thorns?

May we be determinant to relate with one another beyond the "looks like" and the superficiality of material achievements. May our heart be sensitive to the water spread upon us, so we could all be the soil where the seeds of love, compassion and peace take roots. And may we choose to live under the law of the Spirit that leads us into new life, together, valuing the sacredness of our neighbors. May it be so. Amen.