

Acts 16: 16 – 34
Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17: 20-26
7 Easter, Yr. C.

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“When Glory is Given”

Francis of Assisi was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, one of the rising classes that were changing the face of society. Francis hoped for glory in combat that would secure his position as a knight. Claire of Assisi was the daughter of local nobility, raised in wealth and power, destined for a marriage that would assist her family and bring glory to her children. Both of them fled from their expected futures because they each experienced a moment of glory given to them by the Holy Spirit. Both of them were severe disappointments to their parents. This glory they found was not of earthly construct; this glory was God’s powerful call to a life of purity, simplicity, and prayer.

In the case of Francis, he publicly rejected his own family by publicly stripping off the clothes his father had provided him and declaring that he would own nothing from that day forward. In the case of Claire, she fled her family home on the night of Palm Sunday, cut her hair as a sign of her acceptance of the monastic life and clothed herself in coarse wool. For both of these extraordinary people, their rejection of everything that smacked of human glory was, to them, a sign of complete acceptance of God’s glory. In a world that relished both power and wealth, in a world that was consumed with accumulating things and controlling people, both Francis and Claire understood that God’s glory is always the opposite of the world’s glory. They lived in resolute poverty, owning nothing, and refusing honors or preferments. At the end of his life, Francis asked that he be taken outside, put on the ground naked, so that he could die as he was born – naked and owning nothing.

Jesus prayed 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.” I have been puzzling over this notion of glory this Eastertide. The word glory derives from a Hebrew word meaning weight or substance. Dictionaries tell us that glory is about praise, the conferring of honor, of rewards given for accomplishments. Glory also denotes an aura or halo or nimbus of light. The Gospel of John is quite fascinated with glory as the ministry of Christ Jesus is understood, in part, as a glorification of God. We are to understand that glory is a very good thing, much to be desired, for it comes from God and is deeply related to God.

But is this glory the sort of glory we humans think we know about? Is this glory the triumphal entrance of the victorious, complete with banners, orchestral music, adoring crowds, and blushing maidens blowing kisses, the sort of Hollywood movie triumph? Is this the ultimate Olympic gold medal triumph? Is glory all about vanquishing the hated enemy, scoring the winning basket right at the buzzer, throwing or catching the touchdown pass in the waning seconds of the Super Bowl? Is glory that moment when all those who doubted us, all those who laughed at us, all those who did not believe in us are shown to be totally wrong by our undeniable success and, therefore, bow down and admit how great we are? Is glory only when

we defeat everyone else and get all the attention, all the prizes, all the admiration? Is glory only about becoming Number One?

Not only the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus suggests that God's glory is something else, but also the lives of the apostles strongly suggest that glory is not about winning all the prizes or any prize constructed by humans. Consider the story of Paul and Silas in Philippi.

They run right into religious competitors who have a nice little fortune-telling scheme going on and Paul promptly ruins it. This causes their arrest by the authorities and their flogging and imprisonment. This seems decidedly inglorious – no accolades, no laurel leaves, no gold medals, no parades, just bread and water in the prison. So much for glory in Philippi. We are, of course, to understand that no prison can hold the Holy Spirit inspired apostles so that timely earthquake is meant to reinforce the true power of the apostles over against the puny ability to tell fortunes. Moreover, Paul and the others increasingly understand that their glory requires great sacrifices from them. The glory they reflect is the glory of the servant leader – humble and modest, focused always on the other, rejoicing in the comfort and success of others rather than in any of their own accomplishments. So, Paul does not even try to leave the prison but works to convert the jailer successfully. Who, in return, releases Paul to continue his ministry efforts.

Contrast that glory with the slave girl who makes her owners a great deal of money. It turns out that one can make a lot of money in the religion business. It was true in Paul's day and it is true today. The marketing and selling of faith is always present. Fortune-telling, miracle cures, relics, faith-healing, secret knowledge, long-lost wisdom of the ascended masters, séances, the list is mind-numbingly endless. Father Divine, a charismatic preacher of the 1930's, used to lock the doors to his church when he began to preach and would not unlock the doors until the collection plate was sufficiently full. And there is that historical matter of the selling of indulgences that launched, in part, the Protestant Reformation.

The church is always at risk for substituting human glory for God's glory. It is our Achilles heel. Churches are prone to wishing for the glory of winning earthly accolades, of being bigger, having more members, being more powerful, having more money, more influence, more control because churches are seduced into thinking that is the way to God's glory. But what all this really leads to is power and dominion which corrupts and destroys. The evidence is all around us. When churches grow too rich, too powerful, too focused on themselves, they lose their way. They are seduced by false glory.

But Jesus begs us to see his glory, not the world's false glory. God's true glory is fully realized in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus. Jesus says that the world does not know God; the world does not fully grasp God's glory. That is why Jesus came to be one of us, to walk with us, to talk with us, to teach us, to be with us. There is another way and it is a way that leads to true glory – a glory that is not divisive or controlling or excluding. This glory is one of caring for others, of serving others, of loving others. This glory is never about making money off of people's fears and worries. This glory is not about shaming people, threatening people, denying people. This glory is about welcoming people, encouraging people, feeding people, and loving people.

Maxwell Anderson wrote a play in the 1920's called, "What Price Glory?" His play was about the horrific destruction of World War I and his answer was that human glory extracted too great a price. But we also should ask ourselves, individually, and as a parish, and as a denomination, "what price glory?" And when we do, we should also ask "whose glory?" Are we substituting human glory for God's glory? Are we seduced by human accolades, the momentary buzz of publicity, the temporary roar of the crowds, the fifteen seconds of fame so many struggle for?

Or are we called to God's glory? Are we called to do the quiet work of making the world a better place for all who are in it? Are we called to bring in rather than drive out? Are we called to make the healing love of God known to everyone?

The answer is clear. From the foundation of the world, God has yearned for all creation to reflect and share in God's glory. The personification of that glory is Christ Jesus who has shown us the Way to be living members of God's glory. We may not be as focused as Francis or Claire – our lives may never be that clear and pure. But we can be part of God's glory by being less of ourselves and more of one another. And when we do, we shall know God more deeply.

Amen.