

**Last Epiphany: II Corinthians 3.12-4.2****March 1, 2019****The Rev. Scott Walters**

Ardelle and I don't own many priceless objects, but one of them hangs on a magnetic strip by the stove. It's a fine old Dexter chef's knife that's seen so much use the rivets protrude from the worn wooden handle by at least an eighth of an inch. It may have been used to prepare Bonnie and Clyde's last meal by Ardelle's grandfather at the Owl Cafe in Bastrop, Louisiana, but that's another story for another day. The reason I love it most is because Ardelle's mother Cora gave it to me.

She may have given me the knife because I'd been dropping hints for years by admiring it out loud each time I pulled it from the drawer in her kitchen where it lived with a bunch of flimsy steak knives and potato peelers. But what she said was I should take it because Ardelle's sister Dorcas might get it someday and not know any better than to run it through the dishwasher.

Cora would have said this if Dorcas had been standing there with us. But a moment later she would have realized Dorcas's feelings might have been hurt by the statement, and would have blurted out a long and heartfelt apology before determining whether said feelings had indeed suffered harm.

It's not quite right to say Cora was an unreflective person. It's just that she put whatever she felt out into the world immediately and reflected on it afterwards.

Ardelle and I were in the Double Wells Assembly of God Church a few miles outside Pine Bluff to bury Cora a year ago today. Hers was the most fully unveiled face I think I've ever known.

Ardelle's family and mine were pretty different. I am the oldest of two and Ardelle is Cora's thirteenth child of fourteen by birth and two more by adoption. This means our son Alden could be my parents' very first grandchild and the 47th for Cora and Henri, who were far from through.

But Cora put her overfull quiver of children to good use. In the 1960s, upon realizing an African American family would not be served communion one Sunday, Cora didn't ruminate about what to do. She stood up mid service and announced that Jesus's blood was shed for each and every person and that she would not be part of a congregation that refused to include any of his children. She then gathered the considerable train of her family and marched them out of the church.

If some of the details of that story are disputed by a few family members, that Cora was capable of making such a scene is not. After all, this was the woman who thought it unfair that boys were allowed to take off their shirts in the sweltering Arkansas heat, but the girls were not. She told her children this as they were working in the garden one day. When the boys continued to ignore her plea for fairness, she said, "OK, then." And removed her own shirt. Which made her point quite effectively, I'm told.

Unveiled. That's what Cora Pote's Christian faith was. Unveiled. Startlingly so at times.

I got to thinking of Cora this week, not only because of the anniversary of her burial, but because I got tripped up by that reading from 2nd Corinthians. Did anybody else notice it? I know we're not supposed to look over at the epistle when we've got Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus with the three great prophets at the Transfiguration. But did anybody notice what St. Paul just said?

He said, "We need to be bold, people. Not like that sheepish Moses guy, who put a veil over his face after he talked to God. We're going to let our unveiled faces shine with the glory of God, no matter who it blinds."

Moses, y'all! St. Paul is throwing Moses under the ark! And not Moses on just any old day in the life of this greatest of all the prophets. Moses on the day he brings the two stone tablets of the covenant back from the face to face conversation with God that he somehow survived. Paul says, "What was he thinking, putting a towel on his head when it's all shining with glory. Whatever you do, don't live like that guy."

I know Cora liked St. Paul. She probably could have quoted to you half of everything he wrote. This was the first it occurred to me that Paul might have gotten a kick out of Cora. She was sure with him on the complete unveiling of our lives thing.

The pentecostal faith of my in-laws was very strange to me. But I don't believe there's a perfect expression of Christianity. Nor do I believe there is any expression of faith without some kernel of genius. And I think the genius of charismatic churches lies in the sense that there is great spiritual power in letting go of inhibitions. The notion that if we could become utterly unveiled to each other we could become utterly transparent to God. And we could be beautifully changed in the process.

I still believe there's something true in all this, even if I did go off and join the Episcopal Church where the only thing more dear to us than our orderly processions and polished silver are our inhibitions. I mean, we're the ones who charged those early Methodists with the unforgivable sin of "enthusiasm." True story.

But there is a great Anglican thinker who likes this passage from 2nd Corinthians as well. Rowan Williams preached about it at the wedding of his friend, a theologian named John Milbank. He described a marriage as a lifelong process in which two people unveil themselves to each other. A process of letting more and more of the truth of themselves be known by the other. A way of looking at each other more and more clearly over time.

He was speaking at a wedding, but he made clear that this is what God intends for all our relationships. And this unveiling of ourselves requires two things: truth and love. Both are absolutely necessary.

He says, "There can be no love without truth. Without clear vision, love is a business of projection and fantasy. And there can be no truth without love. Without trust and tenderness and courtesy, truth will vanish behind the walls of fear and pain."

This is a word for us and for our time, isn't it? If Paul overdid it in his takedown of Moses in search of a decent metaphor, he was onto something we still need to hear. We can't scream the truth as we see it at each other and expect anything true to emerge. We'll keep it covered up in defensiveness and fear.

But love is what makes space for truth. Always. Love, which includes a readiness to forgive, is what gives me the space to unveil the truth about myself to you. If I think I'll be judged and rejected, the veil is staying on. But if I think this is a place of love, I might let it slip a little and see what happens.

And what Paul says is that we get to see more than just each other when we let our veils fall. He says our faces, your face and my face and the face of any other human being if it is truly unveiled, are mirrors for the glory of God. A glory that can change us into its likeness, if we'll let ourselves be exposed to it in each other.

So, who are the Cora Potes and St. Pauls in your life? The people who will call the bluff of the conventions and inhibitions that keep us from the truth about ourselves and our world. People who will call out anyone, even Moses, if that's what it takes to name the veils the world gives us to walk around underneath.

Friends like these will challenge us and infuriate us at times. This is true both of St. Paul and my dear mother-in-law for me. But they can also call us to a better way, if we'll let them. A truer way.

But if we think our spiritual work is to will ourselves all by ourselves to be a little more like them, even to be someone more honest, transparent, and true, we're probably just exchanging one veil of personality for another.

It takes truth and love in community to be transformed. Truth and love. Only that. But all of that. And always with one another. Because when truth and love make it safe enough here at Calvary for the veils to drop, the place where I'll then see a reflection of God's face is in yours.