



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
28 May 2017  
Sermon: "The Glorified Heart"  
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block  
  
Psalm 68:1-10  
John 17:1-11

"Inside this little wooden box - is God." (*Samantha holds up box*)  
This is what Ms. Roberta said to her antsy fifth grade Sunday School class.  
"Do you want to see what God looks like?"

All of her students began to jump high in their seats.  
"Ooo, Ooo, Yes! Yes!" "Can I see? Can I see?"

Ten-year-old David, on the other hand, was much more skeptical. He slouched back in his chair and grumbled, "God in that tiny box? Come on! How'd you capture God anyway AND how come God is travel size - I thought God was as big as the universe?"

"Who wants to open the box first?" asked Ms. Roberta. Many of the students threw their hands straight in the air. Before anyone was called upon, she warned the class, "Now I just want to tell you to proceed with great caution - once you get a glimpse of almighty God, you will never be the same. Seeing God in all God's glory will change you in profound ways - forever."

The students began to lower their hands.

"How about if we just keep this box on the table here for a while?" she said "...just so we don't rush into anything, so you can be sure that you are really ready for what lies inside."

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Who here hasn't wondered what God really looks like?  
Haven't we hungered to really know the Lord,  
to finally feel completely certain in our faith,  
to be able to approach God with questions that have long-burdened our hearts,  
to feel fully connected to God's glory like never before?

And yet at the same time, we know that if we truly are able to recognize God, our lives will have to shift in major ways. We are not sure if we want to have to turn away from our own glorious dreams and hard-earned accomplishments, in order to follow God's Spirit down an unknown path, way beyond the safety of these walls.

When we think about the word “glory”, we think - achievement. We think winner. We think success: the Olympics. The Oscars. Class President. Graduation.  
A well-fought battle that finally prompts the enemy to retreat.  
A team of soccer players pronounced world champions.  
A winning candidate thanking a crowd of supporters.  
An honorary college degree awarded to one who is successful.  
A well-earned promotion – making one head of the company.

We don't really give out awards for:

“Most improved pray-er”

“Perfect worship attendance”

“Best group hymn harmony”

“Most zealous passer of peace”

“Glory” as we know it is an end goal. Success that we yearn to achieve because we hope and believe it will fortify our life's worth. There is no glory in coming in second place, or having tried your hardest, or not being “quite” there yet. There is certainly no glory in losing.

Yet “God's glory”: the glory Jesus talks about over and over again in today's passage, the glory Jesus exemplifies to us throughout his life and ministry, is far different than this very human understanding of it.

In his lifetime, Jesus never achieved “world-wide success.”

He wasn't wealthy or competitive or even well-educated.

He was rebellious, radical, a rule breaker for sure.

He didn't own his own home and we can argue that he was never married or had children.

He was certainly despised by those in power.

And in his mid-thirties, he was put on trial.

He was tortured and condemned to die on a cross.

Not a very 'glorious' life at all.

This is confusing. How is Jesus a vision of God *glorified*? And when Jesus speaks to the Lord about “glory” – that night before his death - what exactly is he trying to say?

*“Glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you,” Jesus prays.*

*“Father, I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. Glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”*

For the Gospel writer John, glory is not a moment in time, not an end goal or a finish line, it is the embodiment of something far more mysterious and precious and simple:  
if we see Jesus, we see God.

We see a life focused on God's wondrous hopes for the world:

each step moving towards those in need,  
each word more courageous than the last,  
each sacrifice faced with faithful trust,  
each goodbye sprinkled with that promise that this is not the end.

It would seem that Jesus lived an “inglorious” life - and maybe that’s the point.  
Maybe glory is something more.

Perhaps glory tasted sweet on Christ’s bitter journey, because God was serving as his companion.

Perhaps glory abounded when the nets were left at sea and the stones dropped to the ground.

Perhaps glory was felt in the air as the sermon on the mount was offered and the palms were gently laid on the ground.

Perhaps there was even glory at the cross because it was there when the joy of resurrection was being prepared.

Christ calls us to share in a new kind of glory:

not built on fame and fortune, but rather as part of a life-long process of emptying ourselves, in order to serve as vessels for God’s goodness;

to courageously and compassionately use our hands to heal this sacred and divided earth.

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In his book *Just Mercy*, Attorney Bryson Stevenson speaks about his work defending the poor, people of color, and those wrongly convicted of crimes. During a visit to an African American church in Alabama, Bryson was sharing about his work with a crowd, when an older black gentleman, in a faded brown suit, sitting in a wheelchair began to shout, “Do you know what you are doing? Do you know what you are doing?” Bryson was taken aback not sure if the man was really asking or just being hostile.

“I think so...” he said sheepishly.”

The older man cut him off. “You are beating the drum for justice. You’ve got to keep beating the drum for justice.” He gestured for Bryson to come close.

“You see this scar on the top of my head? I got this scar in Greene County, Alabama trying to register to vote in 1964. You see this scar on the side of my head? I got this scar in Mississippi demanding civil rights.” His voice grew stronger. “You see this mark? I got this bruise in Birmingham after the Children’s Crusade. People think these are my scars, cuts and bruises. They’re wrong. These are my medals of honor.”<sup>i</sup>

Looking through the lens of John 17, we can say that the old man’s scars are his “glory”. In truth, Jesus shows us that we never know when God’s glory will show up – in a scar, in a memory, in an unexpected conversation. This runs counter to everything we thought we understood about glory.

Glory and winning feel like they belong side by side, but God's glory is found at the foot of a cross, between two criminals, wearing a crown of thorns. What so many would call losing, we know it as glory: the pain that makes way for the promise of Easter morning.

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That night in Gethsemane Jesus was saying his final goodbyes. He knew his life would be cut short. He knew the worst was coming soon, and the hope of resurrection - not far off in the distance.

In John's Gospel, Jesus does not beg for this cup to pass over, he doesn't ask God to reconsider the cross. Jesus knows God as God knows him, Jesus knows that his disciples are equipped and ready. He knows that his work on earth is nearly done and his heavenly welcome is being prepared.

*"All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them". He says to the Lord. "Protect them in your name that you have given me, so they may be one, as we are one."*

Jesus knows that if we can open ourselves to God's true glory, it will bring us closer to our Creator, to one another. The Greek word for glory can be translated in many ways; one of these ways is "the sustaining presence of the Lord." It is what gets us from today to tomorrow. It is the constant searching and discovering and falling and rising and looking way beyond what our eyes can see.

For when we get even a small glimpse of God's glory, a touch of God's presence, we will never be the same. God wants us to see what Jesus saw, do as Jesus did. Live to glorify God alone.

How do we do this?

When we commit ourselves to sharing Christ's boundless justice, mercy and compassion we are glorifying God.

When we reach out to the stranger, speak out for the voiceless, care for the earth, we are glorifying God.

When we love one another in community, do what is right instead of what is safe, find the hope in the midst of tragedy, we are glorifying God.

We are making the "presence of the Lord" visible to the naked eye - to those most in need. And God's glory abounds.

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The national hospital program *No One Dies Alone* connects terminal patients (without any loved ones close by or to speak of) with volunteers who will sit at their bedsides during their final hours of life. The ethos of the program is simple: every person - no matter who they are, no matter how they've lived their life - should not have to die alone.

Long-time volunteer, Marilyn Judson said this about her experience:

"Most of the patients with whom I've visited are already non-responsive. In other words, they don't open their eyes, they don't speak, but we're told that the last senses to go at the time of death are hearing and touch. So, our training involves connecting with them in those ways. I'll often say: 'Hi, I'm Marilyn, I'm a volunteer - here to just keep you company. I'll be holding your hand and moistening your lips or whatever it looks like you may need.'

"Then I will repeat some phrases like, 'May you be happy, may you be without suffering, may you be at ease, may you be free.' From there, if I've got permission I'll lift my Golden Retriever therapy dog, Frank, up onto the bed so that the patient can have this soft, warm animal presence next to them."

Marilyn continued, "Truth be told there's something about being in a room with a dying person that's on the edge of that frontier, the edge of that unknown chapter, that's like looking into the eye of God. It's just a sacred time. And despite how unpleasant it might be in some cases, I feel privileged to be there and to be helping with this passage."<sup>ii</sup>

As Jesus prepared for his next chapter, he too was not alone.  
God's glory was stirring all around him – within him.  
And this didn't mean that he would not face terrible suffering,  
he couldn't abandon the cross.  
It did mean that even though his death would seem like defeat,  
God's magnanimous glory would sustain him and carry him to Easter and beyond.  
And through Him the world would be changed forever.

Emily Dickenson describes Jesus as the "tender pioneer", his feet preceding ours. And why not? Jesus is the beneficiary of such wondrous glory, glory that he embraced and continues to share with us all. We need only muster the faith to open our eyes and see.

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That day in Ms. Roberta's Sunday School class, the students felt unsure about what this wooden box would mean for the one who dared to open it. Ms. Roberta had warned that if they wanted to see what God really looked like they would never be the same again.

It was ten-year-old David, the inquisitive skeptic who finally stood up and walked over. He took off the lid and looked inside. (*Samantha opens box*)

And he burst out laughing. "I don't get it," he said. "It's just a mirror. That's funny, does God look like me?"

The next student rushed out of her seat. "God looks like me too!"

And then the next student took a look: "Me too!" And the next and the next and the next until all of the students had peered into the box.

“That’s right” said Ms. Roberta, “God looks just like you, which means you have a lot of responsibility ahead of you.”

And so do we.

If we see Jesus, we see God – glorified.

And if we look hard at ourselves, we find God there too.

Made in God’s image, we know who we are and whose we are.

We know what we must do.

Friends, God’s glory is not at a distance, not at a finish line, it is the source that surrounds us and fills us and constantly surprises us. Indeed, it is what keeps us going.

Some days are easier than others.

Some days we’re not sure at all.

Some days the pain and tragedy is just too much to bare.

Truth be told, we have no idea where God’s glory will show up today:

here in worship, at a gas station, Pritchard Park, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the long line at the grocery store, maybe even on the news. *Who knows?*

What we do know is that when it does, it will allow us to:

share Christ’s love with others,

work to remedy the fractures in our families,

cry out for justice in our world,

sit at the bedsides of those most in pain,

offer forgiveness to the hardest people in our lives,

remind children that God cherishes them just as they are,

let out a soulful prayer or song in praise to God,

help bring about resurrection hope for all people - everywhere.

Yes, when we get a glimpse of God’s glory,

and when we act on it and let it carry us forward,

then we can finally say with full hearts, “Glory Hallelujah!”

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<sup>i</sup> Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy*. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 2014. p. 46

<sup>ii</sup> “How A Volunteer Program Works To Ensure No Hospital Patient Dies Alone” *Here and Now*. WBUR. 23 January 2017. Radio.