

“Life in the Holy Spirit, Part 3 of 3: God Is Forming You Into the Image of Christ!”
The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Church, July 30, 2017

C.S. Lewis described our lives as Christians as rooms in a house with many rooms. He talked about how once we get one of the rooms of our life somewhat organized, then we discover a door off of that room and enter into what seems like a whole new room, a whole new dimension

In thinking about this analogy, there are two caveats to our making it into the next room. In order for one to enter the next room which God has for us, we must be curious enough to wonder what is behind the door, and then also curious enough to open it and peer inside.

There have been times in my Christian faith, in my walk with Christ, where I have asked myself, “Is this all there is to it?” As I look back on the times when this has happened in my life, I would say that these times of lethargy in my faith life have been caused by a failure to continue to explore, a failure to ignore the door to the next room that God has to show me.

So, I bumble around in my lethargy and ignorance for a while. Then, I finally notice the door that has been there all along, waiting for me to take the next step with God, the next step in having my mind blown once again by what God has to show me as the next step to my growth as a Christ-follower.

I wonder, can you relate to what I am saying this morning? Have you too experienced that spiritual deadness and lethargy that comes along with not noticing the next door of faith that God has for you to open? If you have, there is very good news for you this morning. The good news is that there is always another door, another room in your life of faith where God awaits you. God awaits you there to take you deeper into the mystery, the mystery of this infinite God who loves us and who walks with us and leads us to the next room and the next room and the next.

The most recent example of this for me happened at the Wild Goose Festival at Hot Springs a couple of weeks ago. The Wild Goose is one of the images used to portray the Holy Spirit. The Wild Goose Festival is sort of three day progressive

Christian Woodstock where many folks come for the whole three days and camp. Others, like myself, come for a day or two. I call it progressive Christianity for the reason that I have been talking about this morning. I would define progressive Christianity as the belief that there is always a next room in our life with God, a next step that God is asking us to take deeper into the Wonderful Mystery that is God.

Once again this year, I did what I do every year and think to myself, “Do I really want to go to Wild Goose? Isn’t it just going to be sort of the same as last year, just warmed over a bit?” And every year that I go, God shows me something new and wonderful, and I think to myself, “I am SOOO thankful that I came.”

I only spent about four hours out there this year. But in those four hours, as I chose the presentations and workshops that interested me, God ushered me into some rooms of the faith that I had yet to consider. What I want you to hear this morning is that as Jesus said, He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, He is reminding us that even if we have had the privilege of walking with and serving God our entire lives, we may have begun to barely scratch the surface of the gifts of understanding that God has for us.

And I’m not just talking about understanding God, and the things of God. I am talking about understanding and being a part of life. You see, there is no separation between the things of God and other things in life. It is a seamless garment because God is the author of it all. So, to follow a religious path with God is to follow your path of life, only with more understanding of life, because God, again, is the author of all and is accompanying you on your pilgrimage of life.

The reason, Beloved, that this is so important is that a connection with God is a connection with not only the Author of Life, but with Life itself with a capital L. This is why your participation here at Grace is so important, because through your participation here at Grace, you are bearing witness to the Living God Who loves us and Who gave Himself for us and for all people.

The Scriptures are crystal clear about one thing about the fact that this world is temporary. We all know that life in this world is temporary. The Psalmist says that the span of our life is like grass that comes up in the morning and is burned up by the sun in the afternoon.

The Good News or Gospel that we have to proclaim about Jesus is great news for the whole world. This stone church and all the churches and mosques and synagogues and other places of worship are monuments in a world that is passing away that there is an Eternal Realm that is not passing away.

As wonderful as universities and other places of learning are, they are passing away. As amazing as the internet is, and as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon and all of the Fortune 500 companies may be, Beloved, they are all passing away. The Entertainment industry, and believe it or not, yes, EVEN the Sports industry, are passing away.

God, and our relationship with God forever, is the only thing that is not passing away. I think it was C.S. Lewis who also said, “the Gospel or Good news of Jesus Christ is either of ultimate importance, or of no importance at all. The thing that it can’t be is relatively important.

We are convinced that the Gospel or Good News of Jesus Christ is of ultimate importance. Our experience with this God through Jesus Christ means everything to us, or frankly, we wouldn’t be here this morning and every Sunday worshipping and learning about God.

Last week, I cited an author that I read recently who said that the Church is in business to change lives. If that is true, then another way of saying that is, “The Church is in business to make disciples or followers of Jesus Christ.”

One time Jesus said that it is not necessary for a disciple to be greater than the Master. It is enough for the disciple to be LIKE the master. That being the case, the Church is in business to help human beings like us to become more like Jesus. We do this by following Him, following His teachings and trying to emulate Him in our lives.

What we have been talking about these last few weeks as we have considered Romans 6, 7 and 8 is that trying to follow Jesus' teachings and to be like Him in our lives is impossible in our own strength.

My wife Astrid and I saw a movie this week that starred Meryl Streep. Let's say that a young woman wanted to be as great an actress as Meryl Streep. So, this young woman read everything that she could get her hands on that Meryl Streep has ever said or written about acting. She watched all of Streep's movies over and over again. She did all that she could do to be like Meryl Streep. How successful would this young woman ever be in emulating Meryl Streep? We don't know, but what we do know is that she would never BE Meryl Streep because whatever is going on inside of Meryl Streep that makes her who she is would not be going on inside this young woman, would it?

For the last few weeks, we have been hearing St. Paul say the same thing about following Jesus. We could try our best to learn all about the teachings of Jesus. We could watch all of the movies about Him. We could read thousands of pages written by theologians describing what He was like, but were we to try our hardest to just be like Jesus, like the young actress emulating Meryl Streep, we too would fail miserably. Why? Because all that went on in Jesus' mind and heart, would be different than what is going on in our minds and hearts.

HOWEVER, BELOVED! And this is the wonderful and critical HOWEVER. However, what if that which dwelled in the mind and heart of Jesus WERE to live and dwell in us? That is the critical difference, isn't it?

And the Good News, no the GREAT NEWS of the Gospel is that this is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus. God has taken the Spirit of Jesus or the Holy Spirit (those terms are used interchangeably in Holy Scripture). God has gifted us with the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit lives in us.

But notice, we are not automatons, robots automatically controlled by the Holy Spirit within us. No, we still have choices. But it includes a wonderful new choice that comes with the new life we have been given in Christ Jesus. We have a choice

to embrace God's Spirit within us, to listen to God's Spirit within us and to obey God's Holy Spirit within us.

As St. Paul wrote in another place, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has passed away. All has become new."

You and I are filled with the Spirit that directed Jesus to be the courageous and self-giving human being that He was as He walked this earth. It is that same Spirit that yearns to direct us and make us into courageous and self-giving human beings.

Romans 8, that we have been reading in worship for the last three weeks, is sort of a primer on embracing the life of the Holy Spirit that is within us.

This last part of Romans 8 begins by talking about that mystery of God dwelling and working within us. St. Paul writes, "The Spirit (of God within us) helps us with our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." Did you know that the Spirit of God within you is interceding for you, praying for you, pulling for you, as you seek to follow Christ?

That familiar verse, Romans 8:28, that some of you no doubt memorized at some point, is found here: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, those who are called according to his purpose."

We might imagine the following conversation with God regarding this verse. "Really, Lord? ALL THINGS that happen to us work together for good? God quietly responds, "All things." But, we say, what about this and what about that, what about all of these horrible things that happen in our lives? And, again, God quietly responds, "All things."

I wonder, can we trust God that far? Can we trust God with all those who are precious to us? Our dear friends, our parents, our spouses, our children, our grandchildren? A fellow follower of Jesus might respond to us, "Is God trustworthy or not? What has been your experience with God so far?"

Time doesn't permit for us to go through the rest of this passage, word for word and truth for truth, but let's just listen to two things more.

First, do you know what God's will, God's great yearning, is for you? Well here it is, in a nutshell. "For those whom God foreknew (that would be us, you and me) For those whom God foreknew, God also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son..."

That's God's will for us, Beloved, pure and simple, "to be conformed to the image of His dear Son." And that would seem like an incredibly ambitious task, even for God, if it weren't for one thing,

Again, God has taken the Holy Spirit which indwelt Jesus and directed Him in His earthly life....God has taken the Spirit of Jesus and given that Spirit to indwell us. The trick, Beloved, is for us to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit within us is prompting us to do, so that we will know what it is, and then say, "Yes, Lord, with your help I can do that. With your help I can BE that."

And finally, Beloved of God in Christ Jesus, (Yes, that's you and me as amazing as that is!) remember this, "Like St. Paul, we too are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing...NO THING...will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thank you, Lord! Amen.