**Restoring the Glory**

A homily by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

For the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 11, 2016

As you may have read in the Epistle Newsletter, while I was away on sabbatical in the late spring and summer, I spent most Wednesday afternoons worshipping at the Monastery of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge. Their chapel is very ornate, with marble floors, and stained glass windows, icons and statues, and other objects of religious art.

On the second or third week I was there, I was surprised to walk in and see that their side chapel was roped off and there were ladders and lights and plastic sheets draped over the altar that stands there, and a little sign that read: Restoration in Progress.

Over the weeks that followed, I watched the progress being made, as an art restorer labored in painstaking fashion, square inch by square inch to restore the luster and shine to a beautiful three dimensional altar piece depicting Christ and Mary and several other figures, against a dazzling golden background. Funnily enough, because the Eucharist was at lunchtime, I never actually saw the art restorer at work – just the sign indicating that she or he was laboring…and, once all the plastic was removed, the ultimate result of their efforts.

I am sure it was slow work, requiring patience, balance, and tolerance of the hot work lights illuminating each detail as it was cleaned from generations of candle smoke, dust, incense and even simple exposure to air. I imagine there must have been a kind of intimacy between the restorer and the object that he or she was trying to recover. Restoration is, in a way, a kind of mutual refinement process: the restorer invites the hidden beauty out of the artwork, and the artwork invites the cultivation of skill and patience in the restorer. Just from witnessing the carefully arranged workspace, I could almost sense the artist’s commitment and yearning to see what the altarpiece would become when restored to the fullness of its glory.

As I gazed at this “Restoration in Progress” one Wednesday afternoon, it occurred to me that maybe this is how God thinks about each of us: as works of art, each one unique – no two alike, with our own palate of colors, our own stories to tell, our own vibrant beauty to share with the world. And yet, at various points in our lives, that inherent beauty within us becomes muted, perhaps even hidden. If our goal, as those created to embody God’s love, is to let that love rub off on the world around us – it is also true that sometimes the ugliness of the world rubs off on some part of us, and sticks to us. The world’s ugliness can encrust our hearts, extinguish our generosity of spirit, and cause us to turn against one another.

This can happen in a dramatic way: when a particular challenge that life throws at us overwhelmes us. We don’t see it coming and it leaves us surprised and scared, bruised and scarred, perhaps even bitter and hardened. On this 15th anniversary of the September 11th tragedies, I think we all can recall being marred by the ugliness and unfairness of life in an instant. And some of us, in ways quite brutual.

But more often, I think, the ugliness of the world rubs off on us gradually, like incense smoke collecting on a painting through decades of daily worship. Not enough to really notice in any particular moment. But one day we look at the image on the wall, and it just isn’t the same anymore – it’s lost its luster. Or we look in the mirror and find the same thing. We see our beautiful soul in there somewhere, but now there are layers of life’s sharp elbows and bad luck, unwarranted aggressions and unfair slams, that obscure it in now somewhat glaring ways. Our hearts have closed off in some way – to the world, to ourselves, and even to God. The ugliness of the world has gone to work on us. And now the light of Christ that exists in each one of our souls to brighten the world…barely penetrates the windows of our bodies. Very few can see it to look at us. Perhaps we can’t see it either.

What does God think of us in these moments? What good news does our friendship with Jesus offer us when we find ourselves staring in that mirror, not quite loving that face staring back at us.

The readings today offer us a kind of evolving answer to that question. All three are passages about those whose lives no longer brightly reveal the love of God, what God is going to do about it, and why.

First there are the Hebrews in the wilderness. They’ve known plenty of ugliness in their lives. Slavery. Exploitation. Displacement from their homes. Years of wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. Hunger. Thirst. And now, Moses has left them to go off by himself for time with God for far too long. They fear abandonment, and their anxiety and fear has so tarnished their hearts, that they convince themselves they must create their own God: a shining Golden Calf – to replace the light that God had placed within each of them, now invisible even to themselves.

And what does God do? God is prepared to smite, but Moses reminds him of the beauty within them – beauty God himself has put there, to shine light in the whole world like stars in heaven. God relents, and gives the Ten Commandments as a tool to restore the beauty of the people. It will be slow work, painstaking work, to live these commandments and restore the community of God. But God is patient with them.

Next there is Paul. Paul is very good at noticing how the ugliness of the world has rubbed off on other people and marred their God-given beauty. But in fairness, he is also very good at noticing that about himself. In his letter to Timothy he reminds us that he too had allowed his own beauty to become caked over, he had allowed himself to become in his own words “a man of violence.” But God responds to Paul not matching violence for violence – but rather with mercy and patience for him. God gives him time and companions him as he is restored to one who embodies God’s love in the world. And, Paul writes, so too for us. Paul sees his own restoration as a sign that “Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience” with us -- might give us the care, attention, love and most of all time, that real restoration to our innate beauty sometimes requires.

And finally, in the Gospel today, Jesus tells offers two allegories that similarly highlight God’s willingness to be a patient, painstaking restorer of our souls – to search diligently for lost sheep or coins, and to walk arduously back carrying the one lost sheep the whole way.

But the Gospel adds an important final dimension to the work of restoration. When it is completed, when the filth and grime that has been caked upon our hearts is cleared away, and the light of Christ can shine brightly through us again – it is cause not just for our own celebration. Not just for our own boasting. Rather, it brings us back into community with each other. “Rejoice with me” the shepherd says to everyone around when his lost sheep has been returned. “Rejoice with me” the woman says to her friends upon finding her lost coin. “Rejoice with me” God says to the saints and angels in heaven, each time the hard work of restoring a soul’s abundant beauty is complete. Restoration is cause for rejoicing not just for the one, but for us all.

People occasionally ask me what part of my vocation to parish ministry I like the most. Put simply, it is this: to celebrate each time God’s patient and loving care, combined with the hard work that each of us does, restores more of the original blessing God in one of you or, indeed, in us as a church. In those moments when you as individuals or we as a community shake off the ugliness that the world seems to supply in abundance sometimes – when you refuse to let it crust your heart, sour your hope, or turn against the world, -- I find my greatest cause to celebrate. And so should we all. For it is in those moments when the light of Christ to shines forth with renewed brightness – to enlighten not just your own life, but our common life, and indeed, reveals God’s goodness and love for all the world to see. Amen.