

Let it Shine
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I met Laura when we were both just beginning studies as at Andover Newton Theological School. She is very bright and quite lovely to boot, but the first thing that really struck me about her was her disposition. She was always smiling and pleasant. She never seemed to get cross about anything. To this day, I have never heard her raise her voice, except once or twice in jest. And even then she smiled through it. She stands in stark contrast to my usual friends who, like myself, tend to be loud and boisterous. She might be the one person I know who I could rightly call meek and mild...at least most of the time. Because there are ways in which Laura is anything but meek.

Laura has a deep and humbling love of God. When she is expressing it, she is completely transformed. You see, Laura is a liturgical dancer and a singer, as well as a preacher. So, she has a number of creative ways to express her love of God. I feel she does her best preaching in her dancing and singing. When she dances in worship, her posture loosens and becomes fluid. She is suddenly sure of herself and so strident. Energy just flows out of her in waves. And you should hear her sing! Her soul comes fully alive in her singing. When she sings it is as though the presence of God shines right through her...she really lights up the room around her. It is almost shocking to see her go from meek and familiar Laura into being an illuminated ambassador of God's real and inarguable presence.

Now imagine that sacred presence shining through someone who is not *meek* and mild to begin with. That might be downright terrifying. Imagine that someone has sun-scorched skin, and wild hair, and a big, flowing beard. He walks with a staff, and he and some relatives are always going off on strange trips. You and your family, and everyone you know, have been wandering around in wilderness with him for a long time, trying to follow God's call to a place to call your own. Then one day, after a trip to the peak of scary mountain, he returns to camp with some commandments. You notice something different about him. Everyone does. His skin is shining now. Actually shining—like a light in the night. People say it is because he has been talking *directly* to God. He shines brightly enough to frighten some folks, and so people begin to talk. The prophet hears the talk. So, he responds by beginning to wear a veil on his face, which helps people begin to relax.

Are you like me? Do you wonder why Moses started wearing that veil? Why would he cover up the light of God? When Laura sang and she showed forth that holy light, it was always something I couldn't get enough of. I would never have thought to ask her to stop. Is it possible

that the light of God came through Moses in a different way than it does through Laura? Might our different personalities and gifts influence the way God shows forth in our lives?

It is easy enough to see that different people have different inclinations. We have all known people who take to any new sport immediately. Or folks who are gifted to play any musical instrument they can find time to sit with for an hour or two. Or people who understand the way complex machinery works just by looking it over. Or those who seem to be blessed by any number of spiritual gifts, like Moses and Laura, and other folks we have known.

Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts, which he calls gifts of the Spirit, in the first letter to the Corinthians. There are two which always really get my attention. He says that the Spirit gives to one believer “various kinds of tongues,” and to another “the interpretation of tongues.”¹ One person *speaks* in tongues, and another *understands* the tongues the other speaks. Doesn’t it seem logical that if God would gift someone with speaking in spiritual tongues, that God would also give that person an understanding of them? Why would God set it up so that way? Doesn’t that just waste time and complicate things? Maybe so, but it also means that those two different people need to find each other in order to better understand God’s gifts in their lives. And that’s a key for me. If these two differently gifted individuals remained separated forever, then they could never unlock the deeper gift that is realized when they gather their gifts in community. But when they come together and work together then they are able to offer gifts which benefit an entire community.

I believe this is what Paul is getting at when he says: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*”² We are given spiritual gifts, not to hold onto or keep to ourselves—not merely for our own good—but also to share in community. That’s how we kindle the light of God in our midst: through openness to the gifts, or the little lights which God gives to each of us. It is in bringing our little lights together that God’s light begins to shine among us most fully.

It is not always easy to get those different lights together. Being in community can be really rough work sometimes. The light which each of us receives from God may not be understood as a gift by everyone. To one person, another’s wisdom may seem like babble, no matter how well explained or deeply felt it may be. To some, one person’s speaking in tongues may seem like some sort of involuntary spasm. But the right person will hear in those same words an oracle straight from God. We need each other to get our fullest picture of God. We need to pool our gifts to kindle God’s light in our community. And gathering our gifts for the common good

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:10 d-e.

² 1 Corinthians 12:7.

means we need to listen to each other with open hearts and minds, and we need to be sensitive to different understandings of God that emerge within our community. To get to such a place we must diligently balance our passion with our compassion.

Moses was so passionate for God that he was able to get closer to God than anyone else in his community. That was his light. That was one of his gifts. It shone through him like a beacon. And that clearly made some people very uncomfortable. This morning's passage says the Israelites were "afraid to come near him."³ Moses did not stop visiting with God. He never wavered from his passion for God, and the people did not ever ask that of him. At the same time, Moses acted on his compassion for his people, and he covered himself when he was with them.

Now, was it any less obvious that Moses had received a special gift from God when he threw a veil over his face? Of course not! He was just as clearly different as before, but he was less scary somehow. Moses tempered his passion for God with his compassion for his people, so that God's light was more clearly received by his community. He didn't need to blind or frighten other people with that light. He needed to remain faithful to God by delivering the commandments to the Israelites. And that faithfulness to God kindled God's light more fully among the people and let the light of God shine even more brightly.

Now if my friend Laura had *always* sung and danced, well, how weird would that have been? People might have been afraid of her if she never stopped. So, she offered her gifts when people were able to receive them—in particular moments which called for them. She was not at full intensity all the time. She veiled her passion out of compassion. In so doing she helped illuminate the entire campus community even more fully. She let the light of God shine through her without getting caught up in the limitations of her own little light.

And friends, we are called to do the same. We are called to discern together and individually how we can use our personal lights to build up and spread God's light among us, and within the world. We are called to balance our individual passions for God with our compassion for one another to help to shine Holy light without blinding, or frightening, or outshining one another in the process. We are called to use the gifts of the Spirit together to more fully kindle God's light and to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine! May we embrace and fulfill this sacred work.

Amen?

³ Exodus 34:30c.

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.