

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Seventh Sunday of Easter- May 21, 2023

Scripture lessons: John 17:1-11

STRANGE GLORY

Jesus' prayer in today's Scripture from John's gospel- how does it strike you? In it, he repeats the word "glory" or some variation on it over and over, especially at the start. Glory, glorify, glorified, glorify your Son, glorify you, glorify me- that sort of talk isn't part of our everyday speech. What *does* it mean?

We might connect it to our contemporary sports worlds. An athlete beats a world record by a large margin and announcers might hail it as a "glorious" performance. A team wins the World Series, the Super Bowl, or an NCAA title and books might soon be written about the "glory" of their championship season.

Other than that, though, in our time "glory" sounds mostly like a word that marketers might use to name a furniture polish or an air freshener. Most of the time, the rest of us just let it go.

Of course, we do still use it in church. It's in the Bible, as we've heard this morning, and in worship it's common for us to pray or to sing of God's glory. In the mission statement of this First Congregational United Church of Christ it also plays a major role in expressing the basic commitment that we have as a church.

In today's reading from John's gospel, however, the way that Jesus concerns himself with glory, the glory of the Father and of the Son, makes me a bit uncomfortable. Does he care too much about it? Does the God that he prays to care too much about it?

What kind of God cares *at all* about his or her own glory? Maybe it's gods like Zeus or Aphrodite, those who in Greek mythology are pictured with long, beautiful hair or big, bulging muscles. Maybe it's gods who go on and on about how much deference and honor human beings *must* show to them.

The kind of God who cares so much about glory seems like the kind who would get upset over mere trifles. Maybe he overhears someone say that he's not really that good looking, so he, like Zeus, starts hurling thunderbolts or keeps the wind blowing in the same direction for forty years. Or he forces people to repeatedly offer sacrifices in order to appease him, placate him, and smooth over his ruffled feathers.

Or it's gods who have personalities like the queen in Snow White. She goes to the mirror every day to make sure that she's the fairest of them all. We all know what it's like to care about our looks, but how could we trust in a God who cares *that* much about them?

Look at what happens with Snow White when she threatens the queen's glory with her beauty. The queen tries to kill her. A God who's obsessed with glory that comes from a beautiful face, long, flowing hair, or big, bulging muscles- who wants a God like that?

But in John 17, Jesus talks glory, glory, glory, over and over. He wants to be glorified. He wants his Father to be glorified. It sounds suspicious.

Yet if we actually read John's gospel, we learn that what he and Jesus mean by "glory" is much different from what we usually think. Their meaning is different enough that it might in fact

help if we could use another word for it. Then again, maybe the difference in meaning that they provide can spur closer attention to what they actually say.

In his chapter 1, St. John says that we've seen God's glory in "the Word become flesh" (verse 14). That *is* different. Indeed, it's almost opposite to what we usually think of as God's glory.

For John, divine glory isn't about God being so great and grand, so much more powerful, magnificent and majestic than anyone or anything else. Instead, it's about God becoming flesh—God the great, powerful, and majestic One choosing to become much smaller. It's God's setting aside divine omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence in order to become a human being who is limited, finite, and mortal, who has blood and bones, veins and skin, teeth and a tongue. That is all *very* different. But it is the glory of God, according to John, glory in the Word made flesh.

The meaning of glory becomes even *more* radically different when Jesus prays to his Father, asking him to "glorify me". There Jesus is saying, in effect, "'Raise me up on the cross. Lift me up to be crucified."

Remember that crucifixion was a long, drawn-out process not only of physical torture, but of public *humiliation*. Every step of it was designed to systematically strip you of every shred of dignity and honor. It deliberately lifted you up for ridicule, mockery, and insult from anyone who wanted to give it.

That's obviously not the glory of a championship athlete. It's not the glory that the queen in Snow White is after, checking the mirror and wanting always to be the fairest. It's not the glory of Zeus, flexing, polishing, and posing with massive and hulking muscles.

It's more like hurling a boulder at the mirror. It's more like giving up any concern at all with big muscles or with any matter of superficial appearance. It *is* God in Jesus Christ refusing any presumed divine prerogative to give orders, to push around, or to strike back. It is the strange glory of God, according to Jesus and St. John.

What's the point of it, though, since it goes in the direction opposite to the one that we usually assume? Ordinarily, we think of glory as distinguishing us from others, as setting us apart from the common herd because of an uncommon and superior quality that we have. It lifts us above the rest.

But for Jesus and John, God's glory goes the other way. Jesus' purpose in being glorified on the cross is to bring God and us back together. The glory that he prays for is that we "may all be one" as he and the Father are one. They are "in" each other, and Jesus prays for us similarly to be "in" him and him "in" us.

The God that we see in Jesus wants strong, mutual, and intimate connection. This God's glory is not about being placed high above us on a pedestal. Rather, it's about God coming down to be with us so that we can be with God. The glory of this God is not in standing apart but in bringing and in being together.

This strange truth is one that we frequently find hard to live. It's difficult because we *are* usually drawn to the kind of glory that comes from becoming superior in some way. Why do we want *that*?

I think it's because we often feel that this is what will attract other people to us. It's what we think will make others want to be with us and to love us. Yet notice the contradiction there. We want strong, mutual, and intimate connection, but the way that we think we can get it takes us in the other direction.

The usual glory system works on merit. Glory comes my way if I'm smarter, wiser, faster, richer, stronger, tougher, sexier, braver, or healthier. It comes to us if we're more beautiful, more musical, more stylish, more athletic, more fun, more patriotic, or more moral. It comes to me if I'm a better liberal, conservative, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu- or in *some* way just "more and better" than other people. Glory in the usual sense is mine if I distinguish myself above the lesser herd.

Caught up in that system, we, like the queen, find ourselves checking the mirror constantly, although perhaps subtly and almost unconsciously. Maybe it's something in our genes. Maybe something in our bones whispers that this will make us fitter for survival. In any case, over and over it becomes, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, how am I doing? Am I distinguished enough? Am I winning?" It can be so exhausting.

But much more to the point- it makes it hard to embrace the God whose glory is in the Word becoming flesh. The God whose glory shines in uniting, not in separating, the God who loves us completely no matter how distinguished we may or may not be in the eyes of anyone else- that God often seems odd and unappealing when we're stuck in the usual glory system. Trapped in it, the God who becomes flesh in Jesus Christ can seem downright offensive.

The Pharisees, for example, had a highly developed glory system along the usual lines. Well-established in it, they were wildly offended by Jesus. He hung out with the worst of sinners. He openly ate with them as their friend. He suggested that such people would enter the kingdom of heaven before distinguished keepers of the law like the Pharisees. All of this was outrageous to them, so much so that they wanted to kill Jesus.

But why? Why is God's love for us, love pure and simple apart from any superior qualities or achievements that we may have- why is that love so often hard to accept?

Well, we *can't* deserve it. We *can't* earn it on the basis of any merit that we can somehow rack up. It's the love that we need the most, yet it comes to us purely as a gift.

Faced with *that*, our pride is easily wounded. Offered a gift so pure and so precious, we quickly feel needy and obliged. Perversely, we end up unsure of whether we can ever trust in God's love for us because in our pride we want desperately to deserve or to earn it.

Which is why the usual glory system is frequently more appealing. In it, we feel less needy because it says that there *is* something we *can* do to secure our claim on God's love. We can set ourselves apart by being better than others. Therefore, God *must*, as a matter of justice, pay attention to and be duly impressed by us.

That does feel safer than being out there stark naked in our need and dependent solely on divine grace. Sadly, though, it also feeds the illusion that we're better off trying to be independent of and in competition against others rather than dependent on and in mutual cooperation with them. That *is* what the usual glory system implies about how we can secure God's love. I set myself apart; I show myself stronger and better; I become a "you gotta love him" winner through my own devices, talent, and merit.

But the bedrock truth remains that we *cannot* merit God's love. Neither can we live independent of others and only in competition against them. For we *are* needy and dependent creatures. We *are* needy and dependent not only in relation to God, but with each other, too.

Think even for a brief moment of the vast network of fellow creatures who are involved in keeping us going day by day. Food on our tables, clothes on our backs, roofs over our heads, roads under our wheels, wheels to drive, jobs, schools, stores, medical facilities, and ball parks

to drive to, to say nothing of churches to gather in- all of these are there for us only through the efforts of literally countless others far beyond me and all over the world who hold me up and sustain me day after day after day. Without them, I'd wither up and blow away. I would die and so would all of us.

Because like it or not, we do *need* each other. We are *dependent* on one another. To think that I can be independent and set apart, to think that the only way to establish my life and my worth before God is by competing against others to prove myself superior- that's crazy.

Each of us comes into this world and lives in it every moment only in, through and for relationships. TRUE glory comes not from our earning, deserving, winning and standing apart through individual merit, but by coming together and being with and for each other in grateful cooperation, keenly and joyfully aware of the total dependence that we have on God and each other.

Being all together in love- that is what we REALLY want, even though the standard glory system is always there, lurking and ready to tear us apart. With its mantra of "I have to win and be better than you" it gets us to drawing lines and separating out. It turns us against whatever is weak, whatever loses, and whatever is needy. It says that we have to win, even at love, and if we want to win at love, we'd better make sure that we hide our need. Again, that's crazy.

But thank God that God is not fooled by any of this. God instead is a fool for love. God has created us with deep need for one another and chooses freely to need us, too. In Jesus, God refuses to play it cool, but with divine passion goes to humiliating, suffering, and even bloody lengths to bring all of us back together. Dying on a cross, God in Jesus Christ becomes the *anti-champion* for the sake of reunion with us. "May they all be one, Father, as you and I are one."

That is God's strange glory. In loving communion with God and each other, it's our glory, too. Amen.