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Learning to see God's beloved

by Mary Button

Lately I've been meditating on 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

This verse comes at the end of one of the most familiar chapters in the New Testament, in Paul's exquisite treatise on the qualities of love. It's been a fitting meditation for a season in my life that pushed me emotionally and spiritually.


I spent this past summer in a clinical pastoral education program, a requirement for ordination. Most students choose to carry out this work in hospitals, but I chose Phoebe Ministries, a network of residences with a range of services for people with dementia in my area. It was a beautiful, challenging and transformative experience.

I was drawn to Phoebe Ministries because its program allowed me the opportunity to make art with people, and as a Christian artist, I know that art can be a powerful tool.

During my time with the people of Phoebe, I witnessed constantly shaking hands becoming still when holding a paintbrush. When words failed, color communicated volumes.

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One afternoon, I sat with a woman who had been shown how to outline her hand on a canvas and then color it in to make art. The suggestion was to make patterns within the outline. Instead, she covered the canvas with yellow, then more yellow. Then even more yellow! And as the color spread across her canvas, a smile spread across her face.

Wavelengths of light

Since the 17th century, artists, scientists and philosophers have wondered about color.

Sir Isaac Newton is the one who discovered that color is, in fact, the shadow of what we can't see. He did it with prisms. First, he shined a beam of white light into a glass prism, refracting the beam into a rainbow – that is, spreading out the wavelengths in what appears to be white light to reveal its many colors. That is something many had done before, but what Newton did next changed forever our understanding of not just light and color, but also of the holy and sacred.

Newton set up a second prism close to the first and put the rainbow of colors back together again into a beam of white light. That was the revolution. For centuries, people had believed that the rainbows that pour out of prisms were the result of imperfections in the glass, not of colors hidden in the white light.

Entire theologies had been built around this understanding of color. According to *The Secret Lives of Color* by Kassia St. Clair, "Pure white sunlight was considered a gift from God; it was unthinkable that it could be broken down or, worse still, created by mixing colored lights together. During the Middle Ages mixing colors at all was a taboo, believed to be against the natural order; even during Newton's lifetime, the idea that a mixture of colors could create white light was anathema."

The colors that we see are actually reflections; that is, our eyes perceive the light that bounces back to us from whatever we are looking at. Not all the light is reflected back to our eye; some is absorbed. The colors we perceive are, in actuality, precisely what they aren't: they are the light that is reflected away.

The more time I spent making art and talking with Phoebe's residents, the more I was led to reflect on color and vision, perception and its limitations. The colors we revel in – the bright pink of peonies, the serene blue of a summer sky – are shadows, beautiful shadows.

Sometimes, as we see people growing older, we see them losing qualities and characteristics that we have loved. Too easily, we can see them as shadows of their former selves. But Paul reminds us that we are fully known by God, even as we struggle to know ourselves and each other.

Living with memory loss, dementia or Alzheimer's, many of the people I came to know only knew themselves in parts and pieces that were floating away from them. They knew themselves through what they had lost. They knew that they were not in their old homes, but not that they were in a new home. They knew that they were away from their children but sometimes couldn't recognize those children when they came to visit. They knew themselves through a mirror, dimly.

Being in community with the residents at Phoebe over the summer taught me about love and loss, as well as about vision and color. The colors that we see are the shadows of what we can't. When Paul writes that we see through a mirror dimly, he is reminding us that it's when we enter life eternal that we come to know each other as we are fully known by God.

The great joy of Christian community, though, is that we already know what we must do to care for those in our midst who experience themselves and their loved ones as shadow-selves. I learned this summer that it is simple: to hold people in the path of light so that they can show forth rainbows.

Discussion questions:

1. Are there intergenerational relationships in your life? What about in the life of your faith community?
2. Are there lessons that you've learned from older or younger people in your community?
3. Have you ever had an experience that transformed your understanding of something different?

Closing prayer:

God of all love, thank you for the gift of the elders in our community. Grant your protection on all intergenerational communities. Give us the wisdom to hear the stories and experiences of our elders. Help us to hold our elders in the beams of your sunshine, so that we may rejoice in the rainbows they show forth. Amen.

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On 1 Corinthians 13

by Mary Button

You know those songs everybody knows, but everybody knows only about 80% of the lyrics? Maybe you've been that person belting out the words to a song, up to that point where you just kind of hum or mumble along with the tune. For me, it happens even with hymns I've known all my life.

Once we get to the fourth verse in "Amazing Grace" — "The Lord has promised good to me; his word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures." — well, that's where I tend to get lost if I don't have a hymnal in my hands.

It seems to me that it's often the songs we know the best, and that have the most meaning for us, are also most likely to be the ones that catch us jumping up and down, belting out the words only to find that we don't have the right words.

That's what 1 Corinthians 13 is like for me. I know it so well, so intimately, so completely by heart (or so I think), that I'm caught unawares when I stumble over the parts of it that we don't hear over and over all through wedding season.

Like the noisy gong at the start and the dim mirror at the end, those parts of the chapter have not burrowed quite as deeply into my subconscious.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. . ." That part flows easily, but I start tripping over my tongue when we get to the part about prophecy. Yet those are the words that mean the most to me. Sometimes we get so caught up in knowing the words that we lose their meaning.

I invite you to consider the Scripture passages that you know the best. Maybe it's a passage that you have memorized, words that flow easily off your tongue.

Is it Psalm 23? Or Luke 2, the Magnificat? Take some time to yourself, take some centering breaths, and recite the words feeling each syllable and consonant. Where do you find yourself tripping over words? What are the passages that trouble your recitation? In those moments, I come into a greater realization of my relationship to Scripture. I hear God saying to me, “Beloved, slow down and savor these words.”

One way that I slow down is by coloring. I delight in color. When I’m not sure how I feel, color reminds me. I’m excited to share a coloring page that I made during my chaplaincy internship. It was inspired by the faith stories that a woman shared with me, and includes symbols sacred to her and her journey.

I invite you to meditate on those Scripture passages that resonate most with you and use this coloring page to help you slow down. Immerse yourself in words that heal, words you know well, words you don’t know so well, sit with them, and color.

As you slow down to color, here are some words of prayer:

God of curving lines and bright colors, Bring us words when they fail. Help us delight in the beauty of your creation. Fill us with healing breath, guide us as we meditate on your word, and bring us the peace that surpasses understanding. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the Scripture passages that most inform your spiritual life?
2. How do you slow down and hear the word of God?
3. Are there spiritual practices that help you listen to the Holy Spirit?



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