

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
March 6, 2011
Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Do you like my hat? I am wearing a hat with a little veil partly because it is such a fun fashion accessory. And it is also the perfect illustration of scriptural hermeneutics. And who could pass up a combination like that! Best of all, the hat is the illustration of why Christians with a wide variety of understandings of scripture can all get along and be friends.

My hat is a reminder that Christian women today normally pray with their heads uncovered, and this is true for women in churches with a wide variety of understandings of scripture.

1 Corinthians 11:4-10 says,

“any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.”

These verses of scripture are very useful for Christians from across the theological spectrum to understand each other better and build closer relationships. Since we all agree that women can pray with uncovered heads, we can all agree that there are some scriptures that we do not take literally. As we interpret this scripture about women praying with uncovered heads, we use our understanding of the ways fashions have changed and the ways relations between the sexes have changed, and we can all agree that changes in culture can influence our interpretation of some scriptures in some good ways. We can recognize that people from other centuries might accuse us of violating the clear teaching of scripture, and at the same time we believe that our interpretation of this scripture is faithful to the gospel. The writers of the scriptures were men of a particular culture, and we can see that their teachings on women's uncovered heads are not timeless, universal truths; they are highly influenced by the particular culture in which they lived.

If we keep in mind our approach to these scriptures about women's uncovered heads in 1 Corinthians 11, relationships between Christians can improve. We can all agree that it is possible to interpret the scriptures about women's uncovered heads in a non-literal way while still being faithful to the gospel. This keeps us out of an adversarial us versus them style of thinking. It reminds us that we are not dealing with one group of people who interprets the Bible literally and a different group of people who interprets the Bible non-literally; it reminds us that **all** of us interpret some verses literally and other verses non-literally. Which verses we approach with which style may vary, but all of us use both styles of interpretation.

We all have hatless women in our congregations. We don't insist that they repent of their hatlessness. We just love them and tell them God loves them. And when they love God and love us, we rejoice.

The idea that words are inadequate for conveying who God is, is a topic I keep returning to. That may have something to do with the fact that a significant part of my life every single week involves facing a blank computer screen and trying once again to use words to convey who God is. There are other reasons for returning to that topic too. One is that when we look at things like the scriptures on women praying with uncovered heads, we are reminded of the limitations of all the things we say about God, and we may get frustrated by those limitations. God is perfect. Humans are imperfect. Human language is imperfect.

And while we recognize that all our attempts to talk about God will fall short, it's important to keep doing the best we can to talk about God anyway. While we recognize that the writers of the scriptures were influenced by the particular culture in which they lived, it's important to remember that their experience of God is real, and that the Holy Spirit is at work in those scriptures still. Mystics and visionaries and other people who have overpowering knock-your-socks off experiences with God are in an odd situation: the more glorious an experience of God is, the harder it is to put into words, and the more glorious an experience of God is, the more you want to be able to share it with other people. The transfiguration is that kind of glorious experience of God. In today's epistle reading from 2 Peter, we can hear the urgency of the scripture writers who know that the good news they have to convey is very important: "We did not follow cleverly devised

myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain."

When I think about these glorious revelations from God, I love to go back to C.S. Lewis, and his book Miracles, in which he writes about the limpets, little creatures with shells who live underwater attached to rocks.

"It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. 'Look out!' we cry, 'it's alive'. And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back -- I would have done so myself if I could - and proceed no further with Christianity. An 'impersonal God' -- well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads -- better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap -- best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband -- that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God!') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?....Why are many people prepared in advance to maintain that, whatever else God may be, He is not the concrete, living, willing, and acting God of Christian theology? I think the reason is as follows. Let us suppose a mystical limpet, a sage among limpets, who (rapt in vision) catches a glimpse of what Man is like. In reporting it to his disciples, who have some vision themselves (though less than he) he will have to use many negatives. He will have to tell them that Man has no shell, is not attached to a rock, is not surrounded by water. And his disciples, having a little vision of their own to help them, do get some idea of Man. But then there come erudite limpets, limpets who write histories of philosophy and give lectures on comparative religion, and who have never had any vision of their own. What they get out of the prophetic limpet's words is simply and solely the negatives. From these, uncorrected by any positive insight, they build up a

picture of Man as a sort of amorphous jelly (he has no shell) existing nowhere in particular (he is not attached to a rock) and never taking nourishment (there is no water to drift it towards him). And having a traditional reverence for Man they conclude that to be a famished jelly in a dimensionless void is the supreme mode of existence, and reject as crude, materialistic superstition any doctrine which would attribute to Man a definite shape, a structure, and organs. "Our own situation is much like that of the erudite limpets. Great prophets and saints have an intuition of God which is positive and concrete in the highest degree. Because, just touching the fringes of His being, they have seen that He is plenitude of life and energy and joy, therefore (and for no other reason) they have to pronounce that He transcends those limitations which we call personality, passion, change, materiality, and the like. The positive quality in Him which repels these limitations is their only ground for all the negatives."

So the words that we use to describe God are inadequate, but if we think of God only as an abstraction with no concrete reality, that concept is even more inadequate. Just as the erudite limpets think of man as a famished jelly in a dimensionless void, we may end up thinking of God as an empty sky, a dome of white radiance, or a nonentity. That's why the scriptures give us imagery for God, even in the Old Testament God is someone with personality, someone with emotions, someone with hands. And since human beings need more than words, God sent us Jesus, someone who could give us a connection of flesh and blood.

We know our attempts to use words to describe God are inadequate, our attempts to relate to God without words are inadequate, the attempts of even the mystics to describe God are inadequate, our attempts to fully understand God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are inadequate. We know that for all of us, our interpretation of scripture is inadequate. Still, God continues to be patient and compassionate with us. Since we know how often we fall short, we can find it in our hearts to be patient and compassionate with each other. Even with our inadequacies, God gives us a sense of the importance of God's love for us, the importance of loving God, the importance of loving our neighbors. God loves the hatless women, the hatless women love God, the hatless women love their

neighbors. Even with our inadequacies, God loves us, even with our inadequacies we love God, even with our inadequacies we love our neighbors.