

All Saints' Sunday, 2011

The Spittin' Image

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

“Beloved, *now we are children of God, and what we shall be* has not yet been revealed. We perceive that when it is revealed, [that is, what we shall be], *we will be like him*, because *we will see him* just as he is. And all who have *this hope focused on him* purify themselves, just as Jesus is pure.”

I could hear Mom's voice from the kitchen sink as she and my sister were finishing up the dishes from Sunday dinner. (It never seemed quite fair that Mom not only *prepared the dinner* but also *provided the clean-up.*)

“He's the spittin' image of my father,” Mom said to my sister.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard her say this. And

sometimes when Mom said those words, I had the fleeting thought that she would be overcome by tears for her father, she loved him so and often missed him.

“I just can’t believe what I’m seeing,” she would continue under her breath, “his mannerisms, his smile, his voice. It just sends shivers up my spine to think how much they’re alike. Sometimes, when I watch him, it feels like I’m in the same room with my dad.”

Then, when she realized that I had overheard the conversation, Mom would stand in the kitchen door, dish towel in hand, and say to me, “Well, it’s true. And I don’t care what anybody says, you’re the spittin’ image of your Grandpa Gleason.”

Lots of people where I come from are called the “spittin’ images” of their fathers or mothers, their grandparents or great-grandparents.

In Monona County, everybody knows everybody, from generation to generation, so we can’t help seeing the past in the present, and sensing the dead among the living, so much so, that most of our cemeteries surround little, white, country churches where, on Sundays, we commune with “the quick the dead,” the church on earth and the hosts of heaven.

History and tradition, land and progeny, family and church, community and saints are the most prized possessions among people who live in places like

Moorhead, Iowa; at least, they were prized years ago before their exile beneath the “Golden Arches.”

“The spittin’ image.”

Even when heard the phrase for the first time, I had the immediate sense that “image” meant that I looked like my grandfather.

And that was just fine with me.

I loved being around my grandfather.

And even though I didn’t see him more than once a year, I remember his quiet grey eyes, and his white wavy hair (yes, with the receding hairline!), and his soft easy smile, and that gentle baritone voice.

He was zealous for his Lord, singing hymns to the

grandchildren, quoting Scripture at the dinner table, and taking long walks in the forested hills at sunset.

And Mom said that I was the “image” of this man, whom she obviously loved, and who obviously loved her very deeply.

I understood the “image” part of what Mom said. And, I thought it was just fine being a little “image” of Irving Jay Gleason.

But then, I wondered what the “spit” was all about.

What kind of an “image” was a “spittin image”?

I had noticed that lots of farmers liked to spit, especially when they were heaving seventy pound, dirty bales of alfalfa hay on scorching, Great Plains afternoons.

I'd hear them say something that they thought was really important, and then they'd spit, as though to *punctuate the period* at the end of the sentence.

You may remember some of their favorite chaws like Skoal, and Beachnut, and Copenhagen which we kids thought were supposed to be swallowed, making us "sick as dogs," of course, much to the delight of the older guys in the barn.

So, I wondered what the "spit" had to do with the "image" in the "spittin' image."

Years later, well into parish ministry, I stumbled upon the meaning of "spittin' image" in one of Walt Wangerin's stories about his own resemblance to his grandfather.

Even though Mom probably didn't realize it at the time, what she was saying is that I did more than *look like* my grandfather: I was his "SPIRIT AND image."

I was his "speetin' image," as they say in the South.

"Spittin image," I discovered, was shorthand, a contraction, for "SPIRIT AND . . . image."

So, for one to be the "spittin' image" of someone is to have the spirit, the character, the force of their being abiding in one's self.

And my mother, at least for a time, recognized that her father was not altogether gone, even when he had died, sensing his presence in her boy.

I see this all the time in you, and your children, and

your grandchildren.

Let John remind us: “Beloved, now we are *children of God*, and *what we shall be* has not yet been revealed. We perceive that when it is revealed, [that is, *what we shall be*], *we will be like him*, because we will see him just as he is. And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies herself, just as Jesus is pure.”

Paul says something similar in Romans, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the image of his Son*, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.”

And to the Corinthians: “. . . All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a

mirror, are being *transformed into the same image* from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Colossians says it plainly about the beloved Son who “is *the image* of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. . . .”

And John says in this first letter that believers will become *more like God* than they are now as a result of seeing God as God really is.

We are but “images,” the “spittin’ images,” the “spirit and images” of Christ.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

Beloved children of God.

The writers of the New Testament seem to think that, through Christ, the beloved children of God are beginning to reveal that “spittin’ image,” that “Spirit and image” of God.

From the beginning, Genesis tells us that “. . .God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness.’”

It is not yet fully revealed, but it is our hope.

You know, none of us can imagine how our children will grow up. Everyday, it seems, there’s another not-so-little surprise.

But we do know that kids look and behave a lot like

their parents, which seems to be a more inevitable truth with the greying of every hair on the head and wrinkle on the unveiled face.

Like mother, like daughter.

Like father, like son.

Like God, like Christ.

Like Christ, like Christians.

“. . . And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being *transformed into the same image.*”

“Little children, you are from God,” John comforts us.

“God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. . . .”

“We love because he first loved us.”

But it may also be true that most of us, day in and day out, really never feel much like the beloved children we that we are.

Much of the time, I have a feeling that we don't feel loved at all—not by anyone.

And sometimes it seems we have to reach far, far into memory to remember again what it feels like to be loved, to sense again the love of others when we were the “beloved children” of our parents and grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our neighbors and friends, our teachers and classmates and fellow church members.

The world beneath the Golden Arches is just not a very

loving place.

And there's always somebody in line to make sure that we understand just how UN-loved we are. How our lives really count for nothing. And how no one really cares whether we are here or there, living or dying.

In his book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, Chris Hedges talks about our pathological tendency to transcend our ordinary lives.

He suggests that we cannot accept that our lives are as insignificant as they seem, and so "we redouble our efforts to be extraordinary.

"We find it unbearable," Hedges writes, "to believe that we might be weak, or below average in looks, intelligence

or wealth.”

And yet, believers are told to imitate Christ and the saints who were generally well below average in looks, intelligence, wealth and everything else—but faith.

John says, “the reason that the world doesn’t know us is that it didn’t know him.”

It is not too much to say, in my opinion, that the world, the culture, the society we live in DOES NOT know God.

And maybe this world has convinced us that we should not be loved and that we cannot be loved.

John would try to convince us otherwise: “Beloved. . . beloved, NOW we are children of God.”

Not because of what we've done.

Not because of what we may do.

“Beloved, NOW are children of God,” just because of who we are and, even more, because of who God is.

And, our true identity, says John, is mysteriously hidden from a world that cannot see beyond our accomplishments or failures, our wealth or poverty, our abilities or disabilities, our physical appearance or limitations.

But that true identity, hidden in the righteousness of Christ, is what God sees coming into being.

“We perceive that when it is revealed, [that is, what we shall be], *we will be like him*, because *we will see him* just as he is.

No matter what you have done, or have had done to you, yet you are God's beloved child.

No matter where you have been or where you may go, God will be with you.

No matter what you have said, or have had said to you, yet God will keep you close.

And, in the end, all that we are and all that we do will look a lot like the One who has raised us.

When I think of “all the saints,” I think of those who have lived in the same love by which God has loved us, who have heard the call to “walk in the light as he himself is in the light [and to] have fellowship with one another.”

When I think of “all the saints,” I see the “spittin’

image,” the “Spirit and image,” of the living, loving Lord

Jesus Christ.