

A bit of background might aid our understanding of two details in our next text. First, about letters—in the Roman world, letters were a form of identification. We are who we say we are and can be trusted, especially in times we go to represent someone else. Second, about veils—Paul refers to Moses' revelation of God on Mt Horeb. Moses' face shone so brightly after the encounter, he had to put a veil over it when with other people. Beneath whatever is on the surface of our lives, who are we most clearly, authentically in life with God? {Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-16, 17-18}

Renee lives as concierge in a wealthy Paris apartment building. To residents she resembles a hedgehog—frumpy, ungainly, prickly. They see a façade, a projection of their prejudice. Renee enables the illusion. She veils her true intelligent, kind, elegant soul by having mindless tv drone by the door and acting dimwitted. Renee's best friend is a Portuguese housekeeper. When she stops for tea each day, the author writes, ordinary gestures become extraordinary, magical. They breathe in fragrance of the tea, savor it, serve more and sip again. Every ritual moment shines with a bright aura of rebirth, drawing hearts to the surface from the depths of soul. Fleetingly, yet intensely, a fragment of eternity enriches time. Through sound and fury as the world goes on its merry way or bursts apart into flames and is reborn, human life continues to throb.ⁱ

One dreary morning begins for Renee with news that a resident died. She wanders about like a lost soul, unable even to read—her favorite secret pleasure. Then she hears from above a piano melody wafting clearly, joyfully distinct, lifting the veil of melancholy. In a split second of eternity, everything is changed, transfigured. A few bars of music, an unfamiliar piece, a touch of perfection. While outside wind rustles leaves, the forward rush of life gets crystallized in a brilliant jewel of a moment. Human destiny rises from a pale succession of days, glows with light and, surpassing time, warms her peaceful heart. Where is beauty to be found, the author asks? In great things and in small things that aspire to nothing special, yet set a jewel of infinity in a single moment.ⁱⁱ

Friends, jewels of infinity, eternity are always around us. With faithful eyes of the heart we find them. Seeking meaningful life, we peer beneath the surface to authenticity in another and who we really are. We pry off a veneer of prejudice; peel away layers of shame and loss; tear off disguises of what others expect, what culture values, judges, oppresses. We unmask, maybe better we unshackle guardedness of our myriad fears, disappointments, unrealized dreams. Self-discovery is popular, of course. It's a never-ending process. As we follow Jesus, we seek in the mirror and every face before us the beauty of God's love, integrity of grace, authenticity of peace.

It was impossible for Peter, James, and John to miss it. Jesus, a thousand carat jewel, beamed with light. It radiated from inside—a moment of glory. Still, they don't really get it. They want to stay in that moment forever. Let us build a house, they say, to possess, to lock in this bliss. I get that. We want to avoid hurts we never see coming. Choices, words we can never undo. Tragedies that mean life will never be the same. Sorrow from loss of someone we'll never see again. In many ways, I'd love to always stay in this safe, beautiful house of God, and not face difficulties sure to come. But truth is, life moves on. In and beyond goodness of any moment, Luke

urges in that voice from heaven: know Jesus in all moments. Listen. Trust who he really is, full of God's love and go find that glory among us always, in every place and person.

On our recent Holy Land pilgrimage, we saw Mt Tabor—the mount of Transfiguration rising above plains of Megiddo, the place for millennia where battle-hell raged between marauding armies. So much suffering, death, despair, blood soaking the soil. Luke's people would have understood: on that mount Jesus rises above all tragedy and loss—God's power of love in Christ greater than any other to take life. That's who he really is. Jesus will go with Peter, James, and John down the mountain to heal a boy, teach discipleship and true greatness, eat with outcasts, bring joy, and set off for Jerusalem finding jewels all along the way.

Maybe that could inspire a new adventure video game! Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. You see, as I look over my son's shoulder, it seems finding jewels is often part of games. My only real experience is years ago—with Clash of Clans. As we chopped down trees and removed rocks, often if lucky, we'd uncover a jewel or maybe they were called gems. When we used them all sorts of special things could happen.

Living faith is more than a game. And more than trees or rocks or anything outside, Paul urges ancient Corinthians to find jewels inside. You see, one trouble was people stopped looking. Like Peter, James, and John camping out with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, some people tried to preserve in formaldehyde past ways of understanding God's grace and living God's purposes. Like inscribing them on tablets of stone. That won't do, Paul says. Especially not if faith is to be relevant to real life now. You see, revelation of God's Spirit never stops. It always continues to appear anew. The same Spirit that came through Hebrew prophets, and in Jesus and

apostles like Peter, James, and John, that Spirit arises deep inside you and me and us together as body of Christ in the world.

Faith is like identity transformation, writes Richard Rohr in a daily email devotional. I live no longer for myself, but Christ lives in me, Paul writes elsewhere. Our life participates in God's life. In that transformation we don't look *out at* reality, we start looking *from* the truest reality of God's love illuminating our hearts.ⁱⁱⁱ And with that integrity of grace, that authenticity of presence, Paul says, more than letters or identity cards to define us for other people's approval or expectations, the Spirit frees us to live fully, abundantly. We use jewels or gems we find to generously serve others for Jesus Christ, as he did all the way to Jerusalem ... and to the cross.

Friends, this Wednesday we begin our annual journey through Lent to all that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. We leave this mountain top moment to enter Megiddo-like places in mind and heart, relationships and society where life is veiled, shrouded, shackled waiting to be reborn, as Renee the hedgehog says. We call it resurrection. Our hearts draw to the surface, throbbing with hope that God will bring new life. Bejeweled moments that reveal who we really are and inspire how we live—in our living rooms and our workplaces, in our gardens, on city streets and hiking trails, in unexpected conversations with friends, or a book, movie, music that resonates deep inside.

Before setting out on our journey ahead, first we share tea together, well we call it communion. As we come forward to sip and savor, friends, I pray, whatever trouble or trial may cloud eyes of our hearts today may be unveiled at least for an extraordinary, magical moment. And we'll catch a glint of compassion or smiling joy in the eyes of a friend. Bask in radiance of loving acceptance. Gaze at a prism of new perspectives, experiences, voices silent before. Glimpse piercing beams of

passion for a concern and commitment to a cause illuminating our path ahead. Rays of Sacred Grace, always with us. And all of us, Paul says, with unveiled faces reflected in the mirror, transform into the very image of God's glory in Jesus Christ.

A man named Kakuro moves in where Renee's neighbor died. His wealth far exceeds all other residents materially and, more importantly, in the heart. He immediately sees Renee for who she is. They share dinners and converse about classic literature, art, and wondrous beauties of the world. Renee is set free to accept herself. And she comes alive so fully, unguardedly, authentically unveiled, that once when they're going out together, residents don't even recognize her.

Kakuro connects Renee with Paloma, a teenage girl upstairs. Paloma longs to escape banalities of her family. She can only imagine suicide in a blaze of glory, setting fire to their apartment. Unless she finds reason to live before the school year ends.

Renee and Paloma—opposite on the surface of age, wealth, social prejudice—become fast friends. Their hearts discover a kindred spirit. They share tender stories of suffering in youth. As they hold hands after tears dry, Paloma says: you give me hope. After she leaves a young man stops in to visit Renee. They share tea as he tells how her tender attention in a moment months ago saved his life from a ravaged, lost, wreck of addiction. Then abruptly (SPOILER ALERT), Renee's life ends in a flash of humble sacrificial glory as she tries to save another old, troubled neighbor from walking into traffic.

Kakuro and Paloma cross a courtyard toward Renee's flat. They stop short. Someone had begun to play piano. They take a deep breath, close their eyes, and let the sun warm their faces while they listen to music drifting down from above. "I think Renee would have liked this moment," Kakuro savors. I agree with him, Paloma writes later in her journal. But why? I've finally concluded, she says, maybe that's what life is about: there's a lot of despair, but also odd moments of beauty. Like those strains of music created an interlude in time, something suspended, an

elsewhere that had come to us, an always within never. Yes, that's it, an always within never. Don't worry Renee. I won't burn a thing. Because from now on, for you, I'll keep searching for those moments of always within never.^{iv}

Searching ... for jewels of eternity.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Quoted and abridged from Muriel Barbury, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, (New York: Europa Editions, 2008), 91.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 91, 106.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Sunday, February 24 and Monday, February 25.

^{iv} Barbury, especially pages 289, 325.