

What do you see when you look at me?

by Bill Moller

You may not know me, personally. I try, generally, to put on a pleasant exterior when I'm in public. Not that I'm unpleasant in private, but, as I suspect we all realize, each of us has our own idiosyncrasies. Some of these individualities are more obvious than others, and most are not harmful unless, of course, one of our quirks begins to overshadow our normal demeanor.

As a devoted Christian, I would expect others to see me as faithful, loving and caring. I hope and believe that is true about me. However, anyone who knows me well can attest to the fact that I am a bit compulsive – I like to line things up. This trait may stem from my German heritage or it might be a learned behavior I picked up in early childhood. In either case, the truth is that I tend to prefer order and consistency over almost anything else. Most of my friends and family are aware of this and lovingly point out when I'm being a bit too "orderly" – such as when I rearrange the silverware at the dinner table so it aligns with the edges of the placemat.

A personality such as mine could make it easy to conform to a highly structured religion, but adherence to a set of rules is not what Christianity is about. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves (see Luke 10: 25-28), a daunting task for a compulsive individual in a haphazard world.

At my workplace, one of my responsibilities is to manage the security system for a computer network. In a sense, it is my job to open and close the virtual doors to the network and Internet (within guidelines), in an effort to maintain the integrity of the system and the safety of the individual using the computer. Because I know my personality, I am cautious about going off the deep end and becoming too controlling – almost religious in my zeal to do things "right". Nevertheless, from time to time I can slip into silverware straightening mode.

When in the past the restrictions I'd imposed were seen as a bit too rigid, I was referred to jokingly, as the cyber-police and even a Nazi (as in Seinfeld's "Soup Nazi" – "No Internet for you!"). Needless to say, I was not very happy to be labeled with either term, yet that is what someone saw

when they looked at me. They believed that I was both capable of and willing to exert such severe and inflexible control. Not a good image for a Christian to be portraying.

In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, you can find the following verse:

So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Gen 1:27 (TNIV)

And, in the New Testament book of John you can find these words of Jesus:

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples--when they see the love you have for each other."

John 13:35 (MSG)

Yet, when a coworker looked at me she didn't see the image of God, and she certainly didn't see love. How could that be? Had my "quirks" so obliterated the image of God and the love generated in me by Jesus that neither was evident when someone looked at me? Why had I not realized that I appeared this way to others? Was I too wrapped up in my own preferences – my own little world? While emotionally painful, it took a third party to point out the error of my ways, and I am grateful that someone alerted me to my over zealous need for order, and allowed me to take another look at my actions and refocus my efforts.

In Charles Dickens' book *A Christmas Carol* we read very early on about the central character, Ebenezer Scrooge. Here is how Dickens describes him:

...he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and



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self-contained, and solitary as an oyster... No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often came down handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Striking! As incredible as Dickens' introduction to Scrooge may be, I have to admit that when I read this recently I thought, "Do people see me as a Scrooge?" The text of the book goes on to show that the complex character that is Scrooge can not only be seen in his manner and appearance but also can be heard in his choice of words and in his attitude. Note his feelings about Christmas:

"...I live in such a world of fools as this Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas. What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer...If I could work my will...every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

Cold and tight-fisted, he is completely consumed by the material aspects of the season. He doesn't seem to realize how others perceive him - he is caught up in his own peculiarity.

At this point in the book, as Dickens verbally completes the painting of this reprehensible image of Scrooge in our mind's eye, a new character is introduced – Fred, Scrooge's nephew. As he barges into Scrooge's office, Fred is described in the following manner:

He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's, that he was all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

This is certainly a very different image from that of Scrooge – Fred was, "heated", "a glow", "handsome", "eyes sparkled". Now combine that with Fred's attitude toward Christmas:

"There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say...Christmas among the rest...though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it **has** done me good, and **will** do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

I believe we are being shown night and day, wrong and right - opposites. One is an image we would never want to have others see in us, while the second would be a most favorable reflection, were it possible to reveal it. **A Christmas Carol** is filled with great contrasts as the descriptions of each character unfold. For example, consider how Dickens describes Marley's Ghost (Scrooge's former partner) and later Fezziwig (Scrooge's former employer):



Marley's face...had a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar...The hair was curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot-air; and, though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it horrible...His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind... Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now...

...an old gentleman [Fezziwig] in a Welch wig, sitting behind such a high desk, that if he had been two inches taller he must have knocked his head against the ceiling...Old Fezziwig laid down his pen, and looked up at the clock, which pointed to the hour of seven. He rubbed his hands; adjusted his capacious waistcoat; laughed all over himself...and called out in a comfortable, oily, rich, fat, jovial voice...

With which of these two would you prefer to work? I vote for Fezziwig, and I suspect you would as well. But can you tell me why? What is it in these images that draws or repels you? What do you see when you look at each of them? Was Fezziwig's waistcoat more fashionable? Was Marley too thin (transparent), or Fezziwig too large (capacious). Did either of those details sway you? Marley was described as having "no bowels". I supposed Dickens could have been implying that he had no heart. In contrast Fezziwig was laughing, comfortable, jovial. Is it possible we can conclude that what genuinely attracts us in others may have little to do with

material things - with externals? May I suggest that it has a great deal to do with attitude and demeanor?

While each person is unique, most want to be liked and wish to do the right thing in any given situation. Christians believe we were created in the image of God. Displaying our heavenly DNA is a particularly attractive trait. We are encouraged throughout scripture to “be conformed to the Image of Christ”. Yet, so many of us become lost in our effort to fulfill this daily mission – road rage, jealousy, pride, greed and other self-centered behaviors can leave us drifting off course. But, God has provided a compass – a divine GPS system to help us stay on track.

The Spirit will come and show the people of this world the truth about sin and God's justice and the judgment.

John 16:8 (CEV)

In Dickens' book, Scrooge is visited by four ghosts or “spirits”. During his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Past, in a touching scene, Belle (Scrooge's former fiancé) sees who Ebenezer has become. He has changed into someone who loves money, more than her. (I suppose if he were me, it might have been “order” more than her.)

For again Scrooge saw himself. He was older now; a man in the prime of life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years; but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall.

He was not alone, but sat by the side of a fair young girl in a mourning-dress: in whose eyes there were tears, which sparkled in the light that shone out of the Ghost of Christmas Past.

“It matters little,” she said, softly. “To you, very little. Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve.”

“What Idol has displaced you?” he rejoined.

“A golden one.”

Not long after this, Scrooge, the man whom weather could not master, turns away and asks the spirit to remove him from this scene. In fact, a little later in the book Scrooge himself tells the spirit; “...last night...I learnt a lesson which is working now...teach me, let me profit by it.” Could it be that the spirit “convicted” Scrooge of his sinful ways?

Also, in the passage with Belle, Dickens chooses some very interesting words – “another idol has displaced me”, “a golden one”. It is clear he is echoing the actions of Aaron and the Israelites from Exodus chapter 32, when they chose not to wait for Moses' return from Mt Sinai with his message from God. Instead they “**fashioned...a golden calf**” and called it their god. Dickens masterfully ties the golden calf to Scrooge's greed and prompts our recollection of the Apostle Paul's letter to Timothy where he writes:

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.
1 Tim 6:10 (NASB)

Whether it is a golden calf or money or “order”, whatever we put in place of God will become an idol for us, and will cause us to wander from God. It appears that Scrooge not only wandered away from Belle, but also from God – putting material things first in his priorities. It is our nature to look at the outward appearance

of people – to what they wear and how well situated they are. But not Belle, and certainly not God.

People judge others by what they look like, but I judge people by what is in their hearts.

1 Sam 16:7b (CEV)

Considering all the vivid descriptions given to us in Dickens writing, it is surprising to read the meager verbiage that paints the image of Bob Cratchit.

...his clerk [Cratchit], who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters....the clerk's fire was so very much smaller [than Scrooge's] that it looked like one coal. ...the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

And later we read about Tiny Tim.

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Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!

It is in this latter scene, shortly after Tiny Tim is introduced, seemingly out of the blue, where Dickens exposes a raw nerve. I know I was caught up in the comparisons between Scrooge's greed and Fred's generosity, Scrooge's emotionless pragmatism and Belle's heart-broken tenderness, Scrooge's cold indifference and Cratchit's humble submission. It's natural to weigh these images in an attempt to see where we might fall among the characters. Are we greedy, generous, pragmatic, tender, cold or humble. One wonders, "What do people see when they look at me?" And then we read what Tiny Tim hopes people see in him.

...He [Tim] told me [Cratchit], coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."

Tiny Tim wanted people to see him as he really was because it would be the best way to reflect the image of God to those around him. No façade, and no controlling words or actions were necessary, just a little crippled boy displaying the image of the God who will someday heal him. (see Revelation 21:3-4) Sometimes we need someone to point us in the right direction – to redirect our path. That may be a coworker, a friend, a family member or maybe even the Holy Spirit.

After the forth spirit left Scrooge, after he had been shown clearly what he looked like to others, the description of Ebenezer changes dramatically.

He was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions...

He dressed himself all in his best...

Scrooge regarded every one with a delighted smile...

He went to church, and walked about the streets...

Scrooge was better than his word...

His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

Charles Dickens, in his book **A Christmas Carol**, guides us through a fanciful story in which the main character, through an ethereal revelation, sees how he appears to others, is given the opportunity to learn and grow, and sets out to change his ways. My prayer this Christmas is this:

May I be visited by the Spirit in the cold, dark times of my life.

May the image I reflect be shown to me clearly.

May I learn from the experience and change my ways.

May others see in me the One who "made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."

Merry Christmas!

