

**Detail:**

5-24-20 Sermon "Open The Eyes of My Heart"

I want to share a story with you, and I invite you to imagine it in your mind's eye as I share it with you.

If it's helpful for you, close your eyes and just listen.

It's a quiet Sunday morning and man with three young children gets on a subway train. The subway car is only about  $\frac{1}{4}$  full, so there is lots of room and not many people. The man sits and the kids proceed to explore. Before long, the three kids are all over the place, climbing on seats, swinging around poles, and growing progressively louder. The man, though, does nothing to reign them in. Rather, he just sits there, seemingly oblivious to what is going on around him and to the disruption that his kids are creating. Finally, unable to deal with the growing commotion that the kids are creating, another passenger gets up and walks over to the man. "Hey mister, your kids are running all over the place causing a ruckus and you need to do something."

The man, startled, looks up and sees what's going on, what the other passenger is talking about. He looks up from his stupor into the face of his fellow passenger, his eyes red, and says haltingly, "Oh, I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't realize...You see, we just left the hospital...their mother...my wife...just died and I guess none of us quite know how to deal with that yet..."

Now, I don't know how you reacted to that story, but I know when I first had this presented to me, the lens through which I received it

changed from one of annoyance, criticism, even judgement of the man, to one of sympathy and compassion. Suddenly, without changing anything of WHAT was happening on that train, how I viewed, how I interpreted, what I thought about the events changed for me, and I would suggest, in some ways changed me in the process. Maybe it did for you as well. Let's allow that to simmer a bit.

I read an interesting article this week about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony in courtroom settings and the like. The researchers indicated that eyewitness testimony was notoriously unreliable because we all bring our own lenses, certain biases, bigotry, and baggage into what we "think" we've seen. For example, a group of people were shown an artist's rendering of an intersection where an automobile accident occurred and where a STOP sign could clearly be seen in the picture. Later, the questioners began asking the eyewitnesses various questions about what they had seen in the picture. To one group, they asked them whether the presence of the YIELD sign at the intersection made any difference in their thoughts about what had happened. And even though there was no YIELD sign in the image they had seen, just the mere suggestion by the questioner that it had been a YIELD sign instead of a STOP sign caused a majority of the eyewitnesses to actually change their testimony as to what they saw.

In another example, two groups were shown one of two nearly identical photographs. One group saw a photo of two men arguing. The other group saw the same photo of the same two men, except that in the second photo one of the men held a gun in his hand. The first group, after having seen the photo and being asked to describe the two men, gave decently accurate descriptions of both. The second group though, the group that had seen the image of the two men

where one of them had a gun, gave a very good description of the gun, but very poor descriptions of the men. The very fact of the gun in the photo changed how the eyewitnesses looked at the photo and effected the accuracy of their descriptions of the men.

Now, this is probably not a new idea to many of us. What may be new for us is thinking about how this same concept effects other aspects of our lives and our faith. For example, we all have made a choice, at one time in our lives, to affiliate or associate with the United Methodist Church. There are lots of other churches, denominations, and faith choices out there, but we chose this one. And in some ways, the United Methodist Church is not terribly different than the Lutheran Church or the Episcopal Church, but in other ways we are very different. The very reason that all of these denominations exist is because each group “looks” at or thinks about various aspects of theology in ways that are significantly different from one another. And even within denominations, as our denomination’s ongoing conflict over the issue of human sexuality bears out, people look at things differently within a defined group. So, we all bring our own cultural influences, experiences, and lenses into our faith. And that is no different now than it was in Jesus’ day.

There are four gospel accounts in the Bible, and many others that weren’t included in scripture, because even those who were closest to Jesus looked at him and understood him in different ways. And we can certainly understand that over the course of Jesus’ ministry, how the Twelve disciples understood Jesus changed. I can’t imagine that those disciples, when they first agreed to follow Jesus, had any idea that that experience would take them where it did or end how it ended, with Jesus’ death and resurrection. The lenses through which they viewed the entire experience had to have changed for them.

And in today's reading we find them at what would be their final physical encounter with Jesus, what we know as his Ascension. And in this passage we find that how they, and we, look at and understand Jesus must change once again. In the passage, Jesus leads the disciples out to Bethany, where it says he blesses them. Now, remember, these are largely the same disciples who collectively betrayed, denied, and abandoned him, but in this moment he blesses them. He sees them differently from what their most recent behavior would indicate was true about them, and he gives them his blessing before, as it says, he withdrew from them and was carried "up" into heaven.

And just this wording requires us to think a little differently about how we understand what is going on here. This story relies on what was thought of as a literal "three story universe," where earth is in the center, heaven is above, and hell is below. We know now, having traveled into the clouds and beyond into space, that heaven is not "up there" somewhere. And while we haven't dug all the way through the planet, we can safely assume that hell is not "down there" under the ground somewhere. So, for this story to truly make sense to us we have to find a way to see it differently.

Theologian and Professor of Religion at Augsburg College, Mark Tranvik, writes of this passage,

"It seems this text will make sense only when we shift the focus from a Jesus floating away on the clouds to what these verses are now saying about the relationship between Jesus and God. This implies a new understanding of heaven. Heaven is not so much a "place" but rather the human expression for where God resides. In other words,

the meaning of the Ascension is wrapped up in the significance of Jesus now being with God.” [11](#)

And this, he suggests, makes us consider what it is we’re saying, or what we mean when we say, that Jesus sits at the right hand of God. When heaven is more broadly “where God resides” rather than “up there,” and when scripture tells us that God is in all things and in all places, and then when Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, as it is phrased in Matthew’s gospel, is either “coming” or is “at hand,” then how we begin to think about God, **how** we see God, **where** we see God begins to change as well.

Tranvik suggests that “a new view of God is emerging”[12](#) in this passage as well. And we see that beginning, he suggests, when the passage tells us that one of the first things the disciples did after Jesus ascended was to worship him. And while we may think, “well, of course,” we have to remember that these were pious Jews - as was Jesus - and even as devoted followers of Christ they know that only God is to be worshiped. So, without saying it and without the word even being used in Scripture, we’re seeing a suggestion of what would later become the concept of the Trinity here.

We often oversimplify the idea of the Trinity - if we consider it at all - getting caught up in the impossible mathematics of 3 being 1 and 1 being 3, or being confused by the language of this or that “person” of the Trinity. In fact, the spirit of the idea of the Trinity is simply the idea of God as community, or more precisely, of God as relationship: the relationship of God the Creator with Jesus the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the Sustainer.

Richard Rohr, in his book *Essential Teachings on Love*, writes, “I believe that behind every mistaken understanding of reality there is always a mistaken understanding of God. If you draw close to someone who is in a violent or fearful state, you will likely discover that his or her operative image of God (usually largely unconscious) is inadequate, distorted, or even toxic. That’s why good theology is ...important.”<sup>[3]</sup>

You have heard me say before that how we think of God is important, because how we think about God shapes how we think about life, faith, everything. To embrace a Trinitarian view of God is to know a God who, as 1 John puts it, *is love*. The Trinitarian God is a God who is in an ever-flowing relationship of love with the Son, who by virtue of the parental relationship makes the Creator, *Abba Father* to Jesus; the identity of *Father or Mother* coming as a result of relationship to a child or an offspring. It is a giving, an acknowledgement of a reality, of a relationship, that is not unlike that moment when we, as a parent, first experience our own child returning the flow of love given to them in calling us *mama or dada*, an ever-flowing relationship of mutual love of one for another. The Holy Spirit then, is the outward flowing of that mutual love to and through others. God as Trinity is all about the never ending flow of unconditional love; there is no place in this relationship for anything other than love.

As Rohr writes,

“We do not have time for anything less than loving! Fear will never build a ‘new creation;’ (Galatians 6:15), threat is an entirely worn out and false story line. The lowest level of motivation is guilt, shame, reward, and punishment; it has not moved us anywhere near a civilization of love.”

He goes on to suggest that in those times when we think we are experiencing, or that other others will experience what we think of as

“the wrath of God,” that if we look closely we’re more likely to see that “it is our own wrath or anger that we are projecting onto God in that situation - a very human pattern that is repeated throughout scripture - that reflects both the growth and resistance of the human soul.” He then goes on to say, “The whole text [of the Bible] moves slowly and inexorably toward inclusivity, mercy, unconditional love, and forgiveness. I do not believe there is any wrath in God whatsoever - it’s theologically impossible when God is Trinity,” [41](#) he concludes.

But even without embracing a full-fledged Trinitarian theology here, or understanding that theology as Rohr proposes, at the very least we can understand that we cannot think about God without also thinking about Jesus. Our lens, if you will, as followers of Jesus, for thinking about what God is like must always include the crucified, risen, and living Christ. The disciples’ worship of Jesus at his ascension was, in fact, the worship of a God whose identity had just expanded for them to include Jesus the Christ and all that he did, taught, and represented. It’s not that their understanding of either God or Jesus prior to this was wrong, but rather, that it was incomplete. The God being worshiped by the disciples in this passage is one that they now realize also knows loneliness, betrayal, rejection, thirst, and even death, as experienced in Jesus. So the ascension of Jesus into heaven alters, it changes our picture, our idea of God. We can no longer define God in a way that leaves God completely detached from human experience, as “out there” somewhere.

Just like the disciples, our view of God changes. Our understanding of who and how God is changes as well. This ascended Jesus who sits at God’s right hand, reveals a God who is vulnerable and even approachable. “When we turn to God in times of distress or temptation

we are not addressing a deity [who is] aloof and unfamiliar with our struggles. God knows our trial intimately well and not only comforts us by identifying with our pain but also assures us that affliction will not have the final word because it is the risen and ascended Christ who intercedes for us and nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:34).” [\[5\]](#)

Earlier in this passage, just before he ascends, Jesus tells them that the Scriptures, from Moses to the Law to the Prophets, proclaim that the Messiah must die and be raised from the dead, and that “a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations.”

The word that is often used for that phrase, “a change of heart and life,” is *repentance*. As I’ve share before, to repent means more than simply saying you’re sorry or asking forgiveness for your sins - it means going in a new direction with your life, it means changing your heart and your life, changing how you look at your life, how you look at your faith, how you look at God.

Today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians comes alongside our Gospel reading with these words,

*“I pray that **the eyes of your heart** will have enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call, what is the richness of God’s glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God’s power that is working among us believers” (Ephesians 1:17).*

And Paul says that this power from God was at work when God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at God’s right hand. And then the Apostle goes on, saying,



*“God put everything under Christ’s feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.” -*

(Ephesians 1:22-23)

For us as the church to be the “body of Christ” means to see the world through the eyes of Jesus - to see the world through the eyes of love. As Christ’s body here on earth, then, we’re called to try to create the same conditions of love that he did while he was here on earth. Those conditions of love would include, at the very least, what we talked about last week as the three simple rules; to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with, in relationship, with the God who IS relationship. We do the “right thing” in all things, because as the little bracelets used to remind is, that is what Jesus would do.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to look at things, at life, at others, through the lens of the God who, as shown to us in the person of Jesus the Christ, is the embodiment of love and relationship. We hope that the “eyes of our hearts” can be continually opened, as the disciples’ were on that day of Jesus’ ascension, so that we can be the best representation of God’ ever-flowing love here on earth. Perhaps, with the eyes of our hearts opened wide, we can see “ascension” with Christ as an “elevation” or “heightening” of our gratitude and of our commitment to not only do good in the world, but to BE good in the world. Let it be so. Amen.

<sup>[1]</sup> Commentary on Luke 24 by Mark Tranvik, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), accessed May 16, 2020.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[3]</sup> “Essential Teachings on Love,” Rohr, Richard, Orbis books, 2018, 37.

<sup>[4]</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

[5] Ibid.