

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 25, 2019

Luke 13:10-17

There are many versions of the story about the blind men and the elephant. Here is one of them:

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today." While they had no idea what an elephant is, they decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway."

So, the six blind men went to where the elephant was, and every one of them touched the elephant. "Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg. "Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail. "Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant. "It is like a big hand fan," said the fourth man who touched the ear. "It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly. "It is like a solid pipe," said the sixth man who touched the tusk. They began to argue about the elephant and each one of them insisted that he was right, and the squabble began to escalate.

A wise man was passing by and, seeing this, he stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched a different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features you said. ""Oh!" everyone said. And the blind men stopped arguing, feeling happy that they were all correct.

I wonder though, were they all correct? Yes and no – each of the blind men was right and yet also wrong, because perspective matters. This parable implies that while one's subjective experience may be true, it is inherently limited and that there may be a fuller truth beyond it. Almost always, the **totality of truth** is even more than the sum of our individual perspectives. Perhaps we would be well served to expand our limited viewpoints and develop a broader, more encompassing vision.

I believe that a significant part of the spiritual journey involves the development of an increasingly generous vision. A vision that begins to encompass the totality of truth. A vision that sees with the Eyes of God.

Orthodox Christianity teaches that God is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, and as such, is apart from that which is created. While creation bears God's very imprint and contains the divine spark, it is not God. In fact, God is wholly other from all that is created: matter, forces of nature, space, gravity, and even time. And from this vantage point, God beholds all of creation with the most clear, most full and encompassing view possible.

Thinking about this, I was reminded of the writing of Episcopal priest and contemplative mystic Cynthia Bourgeault. In her book called *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God*, she writes about the theological concept of *Apocatastasis*, or the final restoration of all things "at the end of time." Her words are perfect, so I will simply read them to you...

She writes: "I first wrapped my mind around this concept by way of a strong visual image that came to me one Sunday many years ago when I was still living in Maine. I had put my daughter Lucy, by then a teenager, on a ferry from our island to the mainland four miles away to meet her boyfriend Scott. Standing on a high bluff on an exceptionally clear afternoon, I could watch the whole little drama play out.

I saw each of the sequences unfolding in turn: the ferry approaching the dock, Scott's car winding down the landing road, Lucy moving to the front of the boat in eager expectation. I could feel their excitement about the rendezvous that was finally almost upon them. But from my vantage point,

it was all present already, all contained in a huge, stately “now.” The dimension that for them was still being living in time, for me had been converted to space, and the picture was complete.

I grasped that day what apocatastasis really means, a concept that had eluded me for years. I saw how time – all our times – are contained in something bigger: a space that is none other than [God’s] Mercy itself. The fullness (or “end”) of time becomes this space: a vast, gentle wideness in which all possible outcomes – all our little histories, past, present, and future; all our hopes and dreams – are already contained and, mysteriously, already fulfilled.”

Bourgeault goes on to write that within the heart of God, “all our history – our possible pasts and possible futures, our lost loved ones and children never born – is contained and fulfilled in a wholeness of love from which nothing can ever possibly be lost.” This experience of seeing human drama played out before her – with time collapsed into space – illustrates a way to imagine the fullness of God’s perspective. It suggests that God sees us individually and all of creation collectively in our fullness and wholeness. God beholds the totality of truth. God sees us and our lives within the most encompassing vision possible – sees our hearts and minds; our moments of grace and our greatest failures to live up to the divine image imprinted deep within us – and beholds us in love.

If this is the reality within the heart of God, then in our gospel lesson today Jesus teaches us what it looks like to live this within the human expression – how to see others and the world around us with the Eyes of the God, rather than the more limited vision of our cultural constructions. In our lesson from the Gospel of Luke, it was the Sabbath and Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. Listening among the crowd was a woman with a spirit that had crippled her, leaving her bent over and unable to stand up straight for eighteen years. Seeing her, Jesus calls her over and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He then lays hands upon her and, immediately, she stands up straight and begins praising God.

Rather than joining in the praise and celebration, the leader of the synagogue is indignant and proceeds to chastise Jesus for healing on the sabbath, to which Jesus replies, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

The thing is, the synagogue leader was not entirely wrong. It was God’s commandment to keep the sabbath day holy and as a day of rest. In a misguided desire to perfectly keep the letter of the law, the spirit of the law was lost. The irony, of course, is that the synagogue leader was crippled, as well. His lack of compassion limited his vision so that he might just as well been bent over, looking only at the ground. Viewed from the limited eyes of man, the healing of this crippled woman was work. But seen with the eyes of God, she was a beloved daughter of Abraham deserving of compassion. Setting her free from her bondage was an expression of love, not a work of labor. Understood in this way, what better day than the Sabbath – the Lord’s day – to do this? What Jesus called them to was a more expansive and generous view of the law – understanding the heart of the law – seeing with God’s eyes.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, **so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you**” (1:17-18a). The dilemma we find ourselves in is needing to see life clearly but looking at it through finite eyes. But with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may begin to see as God sees.

Seeing only with the eyes of man, we are like the woman bent over and unable to look up and see the sun. Our perspective is limited, we cannot envision the whole picture – we cannot see the fullness. We know only the dust and dirt underneath our feet. We struggle to see the path before us by straining and twisting, because we cannot look straight ahead. But when we are in Christ,

when we source our lives in his life and draw from the wellspring of his boundless love and compassion, we are able to see with the fullness of the Eyes of God.

Jesus shows us that seeing with the eyes of the heart means enlightening and guiding our vision with compassion and love. When we do that we stand straight, and our vision is expanded to a more generous perspective – one that is more like how God sees. To see through the Eyes of God is to see humanity as Christ sees humanity: with unconditional love and compassion; with eyes that transcend time and space and envision the wholeness and final restoration of all things. It is with the enlightened eyes of our hearts that we may begin to behold the totality of truth.

Amen.