

With the Eyes of Our Hearts Enlightened: Honoring Our True Prejudices

Ephesians 1:15-23; Ephesians 2:13-18

Focus: So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you.—Ephesians 1: 18

We become reasonable not by eliminating all prejudice, or by labeling all prejudice as "bias," but by laboriously and rigorously sifting the false prejudices that cause misunderstanding and error from the true ones by which we understand.—Alan Jacobs, *Looking Before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life*

God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead God is right there ready to enter and cross over into the human sphere, though unrecognized.—James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*

Only the passionate heart is pure.—St. Augustine of Hippo

First Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 1:15-23

Our first Scripture Lesson—and our second too, for that matter—is from the New Testament, from one of Paul's letters. I know, I know: Paul is difficult, dense, hard to follow, to paraphrase what the Emperor Joseph II said about Mozart in the movie *Amadeus*: too many words, too many words.

And it's not just me saying this. No less a personage than C.S. Lewis—a gifted and astute reader if ever there was one—says the same:

I cannot be the only reader [Lewis writes] who has wondered why God, having given Paul so many gifts, would withhold from him the one gift—that would seem so necessary for the first Christian theologian—that is, the gift of clarity and orderly exposition.

So sometimes, with Paul, it's better to listen not for a clear line of reasoning (because where would that get us?), but for the overall tone of a passage, its main point, or sometimes just a memorable, even mysterious, word or phrase that stands out in the thicket.

In the passage I'm about to read, from the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul's tone is one of gratitude: he's heard about the faith of the Christians in Ephesus and he's grateful for them. And his main point seems to be that their faith is a testament to the power of Jesus, who is not only the head of the church, but the lord of all things. But the phrase that stands out in that thicket—to me at least—is this one: "with the eyes

of your heart enlightened.” See if you agree, as you listen for God’s Word, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 1 verses 15-23:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Second Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 2:13-18

Judging from Paul’s letter, the church at Ephesus comprised mostly Gentiles. And as you may know, the division between Jews and Gentiles beset, and threatened to divide, the early church.

But in the passage I’m about to read, Paul declares that Jesus has broken down that dividing wall—he is our peace. Paul’s tone here is one of joyous affirmation; his main point, that we have unity in Christ. But the phrase that jumps out for me is this one: “he has created in himself one new humanity.” Again, see if you agree, as you listen for God’s Word, Ephesians Chapter 2 verses 13-18:

For he [Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Sermon

I wonder whether you’ve ever had this experience: when all of a sudden, in a moment, you see someone—or something, see the whole world, really—with new eyes, in a whole new light: for the first time (or so it seems), you’re really seeing, really appreciating the someone, the something, and the world, for who and what it really is.

I suppose the best-known, certainly the most dramatic, example is falling in love. The philosopher, theologian and preacher Austin Farrer, a contemporary of C.S. Lewis at Oxford, wrote this:

“Love does not blind one’s eyes, it opens them. And indeed it would be a strange thing if being passionately interested in something we’re always a bar to truly appreciating it.”

To illustrate this point Farrer gives the lover—who is otherwise too busy saying, sighing, singing, the beloved’s name over and over again—shouting it from the roof tops—Farrer gives the lover words to explain his or her passion. Someone in love, Farrer says, would, if he or she had the words, say something like this:

“I am passionately interested in this person. Every woman, every man, and I dare say every beast and every blade of grass, is the work of an almighty hand, which has poured into it an intensity of life, an individuality of being, and a variety of perfections above what the angels of God can ever hope to fully grasp.

“We go about most of our time with our eyes glued to the floor, or looking up only to take in a dull facade of things unable to penetrate and seize the living being in which the Creator himself is expressed.”

And Farrer’s lover isn’t finished yet:

“It takes the violent passion of love to break down the dull custom of incomprehension, the blindness of the eyes and the hardness of the heart. . . . My mind is a vessel, having a certain capacity of vision, and just now it is filled to overflowing with the contemplated being of the one I love and I am only sorry that I have not room to contain more.”

Too many words? Well, Farrer himself acknowledges that our lover is a bit of a talker, but still, on the whole, I think he gets it right . . . And besides, they’re in love . . . Give ‘em a break, will ya?

Falling in love may be the most dramatic example, but it’s hardly the only one. It can happen anywhere, any time.

Suppose, say, you’re far from home, traveling abroad, waiting in line—a long line—to go through customs. But then as bits of their conversation drift back to you, you realize that the couple in front of you is not only from the United States, they’re from Ohio! Suddenly, you see them with new eyes, in a whole new light: they are no longer strangers standing in your way, but fellow Buckeyes! By the time you do reach the customs window, you’ve been talking the whole time—“well, look at that! that didn’t take long at all!”—you’re having dinner together at the hotel, and are well on your way to becoming not just traveling companions but fast friends.

And by the way, this same thing could happen even if the couple were from Michigan! (Remember: he is our peace; having broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us.)

Really, it can happen anytime, anywhere: you hear a piece of music, and suddenly the world stops; or you look up and catch a glimpse of the afternoon sun on the tree in your neighbor's backyard—red, orange, yellow, and still that deep, dark late summer green way up at the top—and suddenly the whole world is on fire, charged with the grandeur of God. Even hearing a word or phrase can do it. What is it the Bible says about a word fitly spoken?—it is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Even a word from Paul can do it: with the eyes of your heart enlightened.

With the eyes of your heart enlightened.

Such events have all the appearance of chance and accident, (“I turned down the frozen food aisle, and there was your mother—I mean she wasn’t your mother at the time!” “We were just standing there, in line, in Budapest, waiting to go through Customs when we met you . . .”), and in some ways these events are a matter of chance and accident—they are certainly beyond our conscious forethought and planning.

But look again, and you can see the hand of God at work: not so much in engineering the external events (although maybe that, too) as in the internal: breaking down the dull custom of incomprehension, the blindness of the eyes and the hardness of the heart. In other words, God enlightening the eyes of our hearts.

And the eyes of our hearts do need to be enlightened, because otherwise the dull custom of incomprehension, the blindness of our eyes, and the hardness of our hearts create dividing walls of hostility between us.

In Paul’s day, the dividing wall of hostility was between Jew and Gentile . . . And in our day, of course, it’s between . . . You know, I really don’t want to go through the whole list . . . First, it would take too long, we’d be here all afternoon (their number is legion); but second, all of these, all of these false prejudices—because that’s what they are in light of God’s truth—they’re already all too familiar to us, and I don’t want to give them any more oxygen than they already have: they already take up too much of our headspace—and too much of our heartspace.

No, What I want to do instead is go back to that other memorable mysterious phrase from Paul’s letter: he has created one new humanity. And so the question: Where and how can the eyes of our hearts be enlightened so that we can begin to see that one new humanity? And of course, the answer is that it can happen anytime, anywhere. God is God. God’s Holy Spirit will blow where God’s Holy Spirit will blow—often where and when we least expect it, even down the frozen food aisle at Kroger, or waiting in line to go through Customs.

But our Lord is not arbitrary or capricious. Subtle, often operating incognito, but never arbitrary or capricious. And so God promises to meet us—regularly and reliably—in certain places and at certain times—here at this table, for instance—to enlighten the eyes of our hearts.

God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead God is right here ready to enter and cross over into the human sphere, though unrecognized.

So Think of these communion elements—this bread and wine—as food for our hearts. As A is to B; C is to D. What carrots are to our bodily eyes, so the bread and wine are to the eyes of our hearts. OK, maybe that one doesn't work so well. So try this one:

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” So said Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

“Only the passionate heart is pure”—so said St. Augustine in his sermon on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. “Only the passionate heart is pure.” And indeed it would be a strange thing if being passionately interested in something we're always a bar to truly appreciating it.

And by the way, that's how C.S. Lewis finally made his peace with Paul. It's Paul's passionate heart that shines through his writing even if it does so at the expense of clear, linear, expository argument.

“Our Lord's teaching,” Lewis writes . . . “demands a response from the whole person [not just the intellect] . . . In St. Paul we see what matters more than ideas—[we see] a whole Christian life in operation—better to say, [we see] Christ Himself operating in a person's life.”

“Christ himself operating in a person's life,” in our lives—that's what communion promises us. Communion in general, but World Communion Sunday in particular: that Christ himself will operate through this bread and wine, through our lives and us, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we will begin to see our world in terms of the one new humanity.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we will begin to see people—all people and all peoples—for who and what they really are: the work of an almighty hand, which has poured into them an intensity of life, and an individuality of being, and a variety of perfections above what the angels of God can ever hope to fully grasp.

“Love does not blind one's eyes, it opens them.” Love sees more.

In the first two chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul's tone is one of gratitude and joyful affirmation. His main point is that Jesus Christ is head of the Church, Lord of all—our peace—in him we have unity. Through the cross, he has reconciled us to God, and created in himself one new humanity.”

And with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we can see that. Here at this table and in our lives and the world beyond, we can see that.

Love sees. Love sees more.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.