

“The Way It Looks from Here”

Job 28:20-28; Mark 9:30-37

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 23, 2015 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One of the major problems in resolving differences between people is that they often have differing views of reality. They simply don't see the same thing. Sometimes both parties can even acknowledge the same facts in a situation, but then they interpret them quite differently. Surely this is part of the problem in finding a solution to the conflicts in the Middle East.

Ethnic and racial groups in our own society draw differing conclusions about the American experience. We may live together, but the lens through which we see life is cut differently. As we know, it's hard to reconcile such basic differences and move ahead together. Just turn on the daily news to be reminded.

What ultimately separates us from each other is our frame of reference, or how we see the world. This view is formed from our social status, our politics, our religion, our nationality, our gender, our experiences, and dozens of other variables.

Whether you were first born or last born or somewhere in the middle may also be an influence on your views. The "generation gap" we hear about so much is not imagined. One news commentator the other day said his son couldn't believe that his dad grew up before computers and cell phones! What for one group is the norm, another will see it as alien.

What distances people from each other is that they understand the world according to their frame of reference. Let's take a forest as a simple example. An artist will view it in terms of form and color. A park ranger will see it as an area to be defended from abuse and illegal acts. The hiker rates it for in its trails. The logger looks at it in terms of trees to be felled. The Department of Natural Resources refers to it as a line item in their budget. So when you enter a forest, what you experience will be strongly influenced by what you come looking for.

One of the major impediments in dealing with life's complexities is our human tendency to be too limiting in our point of reference. We try to fit the canvas of life into too small of a frame.

The Puritans of early New England tried to do that. They had a small frame of reference where they saw everything that brought pleasure as somehow sinful. Just wearing a brightly colored bow or smiling in church could bring strong repercussions designed to prevent its recurrence.

A more contemporary illustration of narrow viewpoint would be the character of Archie Bunker on the old TV show *All in the Family*. Archie, you remember, had difficulty with trying to fit big questions into his small and constricted view of life. Most often his attempts were so ludicrous that it provided the show's comedy.

Our two scripture readings for today are likewise taken from situations in which a common frame of reference proves inadequate. The story of Job in the Old Testament attempts to

fit one of life's biggest questions—Why do the righteous suffer?—into an antiquated framework which held that only the evil suffer. Job was challenged to enlarge his understanding on that question, and finally he does so.

Our lesson, which comes from the latter section of the book, shows Job gradually realizing that often life's questions don't fit neatly into the framework we create. Job asks rhetorically, "Where then does wisdom come from if not from ourselves? And where is the place of understanding?"

You see, it doesn't make sense to him that humanity can make material progress and still fail to grasp how the world is truly ordered. But then he answers himself, "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens."

Job shows progress when he stops trying to fit all of life's mysteries into pat answers. There's more to it than our limited eyes can behold. What may not make sense to us may be part of God's greater plan. While specific situations won't always work out for us, that's no reason to assume the universe is illogical.

Job comes to see that our narrow view of life is not big enough. He discovers the obvious that we humans cannot know and understand everything, no matter how smart we are or how hard we try.

Our passage ends with this observation: "Truly, the fear of the Lord—that is, the acknowledgement that God is God and we are the mortals—that's the beginning of wisdom; and when we stop doing evil, then it shows that we begin to understand what is right."

Now like Job, our Gospel reading depicts the disciples operating with too small a frame of reference as well. When Jesus tried to tell them what would be required of him going forward, they didn't understand it. In fact they even try to argue him out of his destiny. They try to give him a substitute plan which, in their eyes, is superior. They want him to save himself for the greater good, but Jesus just shakes his head at their well-intentioned logic.

Then, as if to illustrate how little they understand of his ways, we have the story in Capernaum. Jesus asks them what it is they were arguing about among themselves as they travelled. No one speaks up to answer the question, probably because they were embarrassed. No one wants to admit that they were contending with each other as to who is the greatest among themselves.

But no matter, for Jesus already knows the source of the bickering. So he says: "'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not only me but the one who sent me.'"

What's evident here is that, after three years with him, they were still struggling to understand. They had been conditioned to accept a view of life too limited for what he was now revealing. They would have to grow if they were going to carry on his ministry. And

where they did not understand yet, they would have to trust him to know and to lead the way. He could see from God's perspective and they... they were just beginning.

These lessons today underscore how important the frame of reference we bring to everyday life. The problem for most of us, however, is that we learn our "truths" early in life from surface observation and the dominant voices in society. We've long ago put together our worldview and don't want to reconsider it.

That's surely part of our resistance to taking faith seriously because many of our cherished assumptions are likely to be questioned. Our way of looking at the world is quite often challenged. We would like to have our Sundays without the threat of struggle, but Jesus says it can't be done. You can't gain without putting forth effort. You can't hear Christ without taking it to heart.

Now, all of this takes time. We don't change overnight. Job didn't come to his new insights instantly nor did the disciples truly understand Jesus until he was gone from them. But the truth is that they did grow in understanding and practice, and nowhere more than in their ability to expand their wider view on life.

As we grow we quickly attach ourselves to those things which seemingly make sense out of an incomprehensible world. We buy into the common notion that happiness is equated with wealth and do all we can to acquire our share. We come to believe that power is the key to life and grab for more and more. We follow others into the salvation of career and throw all of our energies in that direction. Deep inside, though, we know that none of these substitutes are a full exchange for the real thing.

Today's scriptures challenge our frame of reference, and rightly so. They point out that anything that holds us back from needed insight, even an outgrown faith, will not serve to get us what we're looking for. It will not take us where we want to go. These verses remind us there is no truer guide to real understanding than Christ himself.

Jesus tells us to look deep within ourselves, then open our eyes that we might see what he has seen. Faith is not small and stagnant, but dynamic and expansive. Life is for growing, and it's precisely when we feel constricted and uncomfortable that we know we're on the right track. Sundays are a way of getting our view of life enlarged. They are important stations on the journey if we are to remake ourselves in the image that Christ provides.