

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, May 8, 2016
Text: Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

The Eyes of Our Hearts



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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This is the apostle Paul praying for the Christians in Ephesus, “I pray that God will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation . . .” (so 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.” The “eyes of our hearts” . . . what a curious phrase. What might we see if the eyes of our hearts are open enough to see the light? To recast Paul’s vision: are we able to see what is possible, to see the context which now is ours, and to see how we can change things in the future? Paul is encouraging these new believers to see that, with God’s gift of wisdom and revelation, they will be able to live into the future as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

To grow in faith takes holding together both the spirit of wisdom and of revelation, or as we might say today, of reason and of faith. And yet all around us do we not see these two aspects of life set in opposition to one another, reason versus faith, faith versus reason? We only can take cold comfort in knowing that such tension is nothing new. In 1748 Charles Wesley, the poet of the Methodist movement, wrote as a prayer for children at the beginning of the academic year at the Kingswood School started by Methodists to educate the children of miners and farmers,

Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety;

Learning and holiness combined, and truth and love let all men see.

It was a plea for the life of the mind for people of faith, a prayer still valid in our own time.

What happens when reason and faith become adversaries? I remember back in the 1980’s appearing on “The Phil Donahue Show” as a completely inadequate balance to Mel and Norma Gabler. The Gablers were an elderly couple who lobbied the Texas Textbook Commission. The commission bought all of the books for schools in the entire state of Texas, so publishers wanted to meet the commission’s demands. The Gablers made sure that science books promote creationism and dismissed evolution. The Gablers were immersed in the issue and easily out-maneuvered me. They may not have convinced a national audience, but they certainly were influential in Texas and throughout the South.

A few years later the creationism-evolution debate became headlines around the country when a lawsuit was brought against teaching creationism at the expense of evolutionary theory in the public schools in Arkansas. Ultimately, the case was won in favor of evolutionary theory over creationism and intelligent design by the chief witness of the ACLU, Dr. Langdon Gilkey. Gilkey was a theologian teaching at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, a Baptist minister who, interestingly, as a young man had helped to organize civilians in a prisoner-of-war camp in China where he was held during World War II. (His recollection is **Shantung Compound**).

Gilkey, both a man of reason and a man of faith, said that the turning point in the trial was the moment when he was able to show that creationism and intelligent design were not only flawed scientific theories but also were discredited theological theories. “It’s heresy!” he exclaimed, to the gasps of everyone, including the proponents of creationism, as well as the United Methodist judge, who ended up writing a very convincing summary of the arguments that prevailed.

“The funny thing,” Gilkey later reflected, “is that when you looked around the courtroom the defenders of teaching evolution as a valid scientific theory were the theologians and the clergy, including several bishops. Those who championed the teaching of creationism were scientists with Ph.D.s, but not in fields that informed their opinions on the issue in question. They taught electrical engineering, mathematics, and other subjects of great specificity. Being a “doctor” in one field does not automatically make you an expert in another field. So, religious belief uncoupled from relevant scientific reason can be dangerous.

And so it can be in the reverse direction. Scientific reason without a religious sensibility, or even a simple capacity for thinking as a human being, can be dangerous, too. Last Thursday was Holocaust Remembrance Day. Lest we forget . . . we must remember the murders of millions of Jews, as well as some Christians, some resisters, and some because of their gender identity. Inscribed on the wall of the Holocaust Memorial in Washington D.C. is a version of the haunting words of the Rev. Martin Niemöller, who resisted as best he could, first from his pulpit in Berlin, and then for seven years from his cell in the concentration camp:

First they came for the Socialists, but I was not a Socialist, so I did not speak up;

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, but I was not a Trade Unionist, so I did not speak up;

Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew, so I did not speak up;

And then, they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me.

Dr. Franklin Littell, a United Methodist who taught at Temple University, was an expert on the Holocaust. He used to talk about “Dr. Dr. Mengele.” Josef Mengele had two doctorates, one in anthropology from Munich University and one in medicine from the University of Frankfurt. He was a man of “reason” conferred twice over by the academy. He also was known as “The Angel of Death” at the Auschwitz death camp. His specialty was performing genetic experiments on young twins. He was nice to his subjects. He brought them candy, chatted with them, then savaged them with his analytical experiments, and burned their bodies. Reason unchecked by the human spirit, a spirit portrayed by the religions of the world but expected of all people, religious or not, can kill and kill and kill.

So, reason and faith, knowledge and vital piety, science and belief, truth and love, wisdom and revelation . . . unite the pair so long disjoined.

We live in what some have called the “information age.” Everything we need to know is at our fingertips. “Google” has become a verb of necessity for many of us. How did I confirm Charles Wesley’s verse? How did I learn that Josef Mengele’s doctorate in anthropology was earned in Munich? How did I determine which version of Martin Niemöller’s statement was enshrined in the Washington D.C. museum? I googled it.

All the information we need is right at our fingertips (if we can get a wi-fi signal!), but does it make us any smarter? Long before Google became our source for footnotes, T. S. Eliot saw the dilemma: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (I googled that quotation, too, for accuracy.) Having all the facts does not make us smarter; we have to possess knowledge in order to use the facts intelligently. And having intelligence does not automatically lead to wisdom. The eyes of our hearts are to see wisdom, what is the meaning of our lives. And these same eyes of our hearts are to see what is best for all people, what Paul calls “revelation.” “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light” to imagine what is possible, to understand the current context, and to see how to effect change for the good of the whole world.

A few years ago a science-and-religion reading group I was leading invited Dr. Jerry Coyne to discuss with us his book, Why Evolution Is True. Dr. Coyne is a world-renowned scientist at the University of Chicago who studies fruit flies. He has drawn enormous evolutionary evidence from the short-lived generations of fruit flies. He also is well-known as an out-spoken opponent of religion, all religion, though Christian fundamentalism tends to command his greatest attention.

We had a fascinating and friendly two-hour discussion. He unpacked the particularities of his research, and we all were enriched. But throughout our time together, he expressed his surprise that we all readily accepted his characterization of the principles of evolution as he saw them in the laboratory. “How can you agree with me and still be Christian?” he asked several times. For the church members there was no conflict; we were uniting the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety. For Dr. Coyne it was a revelation of sorts, though I doubt he would choose that word.

That evening he went onto his blog site and told his thousands of followers about his extraordinary time with self-avowed Christians who readily accepted his insights of evolutionary theory. Well, the responses he got from his fans . . . talk about fundamentalism! “What were you doing cavorting with those idiots?” “Why did you sully yourself by meeting with them?” “Why did you waste your time with them? They were just trying to soften you up.”

So, that brings us to the Ascension. Okay, not exactly or seamlessly, but let me make a connection. We have said, as Christians, that for us Jesus Christ encompasses all of life. In the narrative of his life, death, and resurrection, and now his ascension, we see dramatized what we need to know about how to live hopeful, full, and meaningful lives. In traditional Christian iconography, we see with the eyes of our hearts “Christ over all;” we declare that in a comprehensive sense, not a coercive sense. We do not insist that people of other religious traditions or of no particular tradition see it the way we do. What matters is that, if we see it that way, then we will live with a knowledge of the past, the Law, Prophets, and Psalms, as Luke the gospel writer has Jesus say to his disciples, that opens us fully to the future. That is a joining of knowledge and vital piety, of reason and faith, which will make us full participants in what comes next, and we will keep our eyes open for God’s prompting.

That is the image of the Ascension which tells us that this is a time of transition. In strict story form, the risen Christ needs to move off the stage in order to make room for the Holy Spirit. The Ascension is a thematic necessity, not simply an aerodynamic oddity. It directs our attention to an over-arching image of God’s love for us that does not keep us staring up into heaven. As the disciples are constantly told, “Do not spend your time gazing upward; get to work down

here on earth.” The depiction of Jesus Christ seated over all in heaven, with all of earthly life clustered at his feet, is meant to elevate our vision of a faith consistent with the past which we have to share and an understanding which prompts us to move confidently into the future.

On Friday it was announced that the residents of London had elected a new mayor, Sadiq Khan, a Muslim. Decades ago his father emigrated from Pakistan and became a driver of one of those red double-decker busses in London. Now, the British-born son is mayor of the capital city. “I did not dream of this as I grew up here,” the newly-elected mayor said.

This is at the same time that there are political forces in our own country who are scheming to prevent Muslims from entering the United States. In direct contradiction of our U.S. Constitution, they want to impose a religious requirement for setting foot on American soil. In a self-conscious denial of our own country’s history as a nation enriched by immigration, they want to turn the Statue of Liberty to face inward.

Now, I do not pretend to speak for the risen Christ who has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God Almighty, but I suspect that he blesses the new mayor of London. That is what it means to embrace all of life with God’s love. That is what it means to be above it all in order to be involved in it all. That is what it means to unite our reason and our faith in order to live with the eyes of our hearts wide open. That is what it means for us to be fully engaged in God’s gift of a new beginning for all of humanity. Amen.