

Near or Far-Sighted: the same prescription

A Sermon by Rev. David Johnson - Ephesians 2:11-22

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and I'd like to begin with Luther's meaning to the 3rd Article of the Apostle's Creed:

"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true."

"We will meet you under that restroom sign at 4:30," I explained to one of my boys. "Under which sign?" he responded. "Over by that restroom sign," I repeated. He was obviously confused. That's when it hit me, "My son can't see what I'm pointing at." I glanced over at Vicki, and we both realized that it was time to make an appointment for an eye exam.

You see, I could have repeated myself all day. I could have become angry, wagging my finger repeatedly toward the sign at the other end of the mall. I could have run down to the other end of the atrium and stood directly under the sign and my son would still ask, "What sign?" in addition to asking, "Dad, where are you?" It wasn't that my son couldn't read. The problem was his eyes, they just simply couldn't focus properly on objects past a certain distance. He was, as we later discovered, near-sighted, as are some of you.

Still others may have another vision problem called far-sightedness, a condition causing someone to struggle while focusing on objects that are close up. But, regardless of which condition you may have, the truth remains, there is absolutely nothing you can do to *will* your eyes to improve. Those suffering with either condition are in the same identical situation, their impairment will continue without outside evaluation and optical correction.

A while back, I came upon a podcast by World Magazine reporter Andrea Seu Peterson, called *Circular Reasoning*. In this podcast she makes the observation, "*All reasoning is circular; at the fundamental level... Everyone has a final reference point that he relates all stray facts to. ... One always returns to his starting point, unless God breaks into the circle with grace to open his eyes. ... Jesus tells a story in Luke 16 where Abraham says, 'Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.'* (v.26) *This is not only a chasm of space and time but of {foundational beliefs}.* ... *God says to those who would come, 'taste and see,' not 'see and taste.'*"

Our Epistle text for today points out two similar conditions, only they aren't physiological eye issues, they are spiritual vision problems, issues of the heart. But to better understand the context, we're going to back up to v.11:

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," {which is} performed in the flesh by human hands--12 {remember} that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Paul begins by doing a bit of diagnosis. He addresses these Ephesian believers as "Gentiles in the flesh" or "Gentiles by birth." He points out that due to this "alien" birth, they didn't have the benefit of either a physical or a spiritual connection with Israel or their God. They were uncircumcised, humanly speaking, causing this division.

But they were also "uncircumcised" in heart, resulting in their complete separation from Christ and alienation from the promises of God. This was not simply unfortunate. It had left these Gentiles completely isolated and blind; without God and therefore without hope. They were in a decidedly sad and desperate situation.

To illustrate this point, there's a story told of an open-air preacher who was sharing the Gospel with a number of people who had gathered around. Suddenly, a cocky young man jeered, "You tell us about the burden of sin. I feel none." Then the man flippantly added, "By the way, how much does sin weigh? Ten pounds? Eighty pounds?"

The preacher answered, "Tell me, if I put a 400 pound weight on the chest of a dead man, would he feel it?"

"No, because he's dead," answered the youth.

The preacher responded, "Likewise, the man who feels no weight from their sin is dead spiritually." The young man's comments only proved what the old preacher was saying. As a Gentile, both physically and spiritually, this young man (and these Ephesian believers) would have been apart from God and His promises, without hope, alone and dead to the matters of Christ.

Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

"But..." what a fantastic word in Scripture. The implication is that whatever the previous statement declared, it's now altered by what is to follow. "But now..." These Gentile readers had been in a completely hopeless situation. Physically speaking, there was nothing they could do to bridge the gap between themselves and God, or themselves and God's people. They would forever be Gentiles; religious outcasts. Spiritually speaking, they were as far away from God as possible and without any means of redemption.

"But now in Christ Jesus..." all of that had changed, *in a moment...In Christ Jesus*. The chasm was bridged, the spiritual relationship restored. The blood of Christ brought redemption and renewal, bringing the Gentiles into the family both socially and spiritually. In fact, the term used by the Jews when speaking of incorporating a Gentile, was "to bring them near."

Eph 2:14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both {groups into} one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15

by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, {which is} the Law of commandments {contained} in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, {thus} establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

Imagine, peace in a nation where hostility, anger, and war had been a way of life for centuries. It shouldn't be too difficult to imagine, considering our own times. In fact, conflict continues between Israel and every possible combination of nations around them. Israel stands against almost every surrounding nation in the Middle East. It seems as though there will never be hope for that region of the world, no hope for restoration or renewal, neither physically, socially, nor spiritually.

But suddenly, through the blood of an innocent sacrifice, peace *has come*, not *may come* at some unknown point in time. Peace has come. In a moment, all the promises that once applied to Israel alone became available to anyone who would come to the foot of the cross of Jesus.

By the Spirit of God, the far-sighted were brought near and healed; the near-sighted were brought from afar and given a broader perspective and understanding. In that miraculous moment, the Holy Spirit took enemies and made them more than friends, they were now brothers; one single man in Christ. Something desperately needed in our own country, or in cities like Minneapolis, Atlanta, and LA. Paul wrote in Romans and Corinthians: **Rom 12:5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.**

1 Cor 12:12 For even as the body is one and {yet} has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

Paul explains that this marvelous grace not only formed one body out of Gentiles and Israelites, it completely removed the enmity (hostility, anger, antagonism) between these two warring parties. The Spirit of God didn't just stop the war. Through the sacrifice of Christ, He completely wiped away the anger and resentment that was so firmly inbred in the hearts of these two extremists.

This is true restoration, not like the ongoing social, political, and spiritual battles that continue to rage in the cities of America; or the pseudo-peace talks that rise and fall in the Middle East. When the Holy Spirit calls and gathers people to the Cross of Jesus Christ, all anger and hostility are wiped away and replaced with perfect and lasting peace. When people humble themselves to the enlightening power of the Spirit of God, they are joined with others who have found real peace on the road to sanctification. Peace is restored, hatred is neutralized, and people are empowered to love and understand each other.

It is this same peace that is offered to all who come to Christ in humility, regardless of whether they started their

journey as near or far-sighted people. Both have been provided access to the very same Heavenly Father through one in the same Holy Spirit. Which leads Paul to write with such confidence:

Eph 2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner {stone,} 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Regardless of your spiritual heritage, family background, or philosophical perspectives, we all have the same basic condition, and the same basic need. We need our vision restored, our as Andrea Peterson pointed out, our circular reasoning corrected. We need the Spirit of God to give us new sight. We need the Holy Spirit to bring us to Jesus, to open our eyes, and then work in our hearts to forgive, transform, and renovate us. Only then can we become the singular body of Christ that He desires us to be.