

10.19.17 Did We Miss the Point? Forest Home Chapel Rev. Dr. Robin Blair

Philippians 4:8-9: ...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 7:3-5 Common English Bible (CEB)

³Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother or sister, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? ⁵You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye.

For those of us who have glasses for vision correction, I wonder if you have ever walked out into the yard, or out the backdoor, without your glasses? The result is that vision is blurry as you engage with the vista before you – you might need to take extra care for the steps you take that you don't trip over something, or stumble into something. Clearly, pun intended, you need to focus carefully on each step, which means, focus on self, pretty much only, when vision is blurry.

Prayerfully, this is not a way of life, and with corrective lenses, we don't have to walk around bumping into things... but blurry vision is a part of what is brought to our attention in our gospel message – the log in your own eye makes the world around you difficult to engage with and see, clearly. And if that is the case – it is difficult to see how to care for neighbor, at all. Life becomes only about self - and perhaps, as the gospel story suggests one has a tendency to get a bit, judgmental. So, it makes me wonder, with log-ridden eyes, did we miss the point?

Doesn't blurry vision set us back from our purpose as called by God to care for others in addition to our own needs? We know that kindness and mercy are as important as anything between people, justice rather than blurry vision judgment is our call to action, and then remember a bit of humility along the way. So if we do not clear up our vision with the tools that are made available, tools like prayer and devotional time, we are likely not to grow in these spiritual focus fruits as called by Paul.

Blurry vision is part of what happens with the “log in your own eye” situation. If you are blinded by your own needs, only, your vision for neighbor and the greater community will be blurred, fuzzy, most unclear. You are able to care for self, only, because survival seems to be at stake because that log is so stuck in your eye, you

think that is the norm! Jesus invites us to “Get that log out of there!” if not, you are at risk to miss the point...

Paul, takes out the log, or in his case the metaphor upon his holy spirit conversion, scales fell from his eyes, and reminds us that we are people who recognize life as a spiritual journey, we hold certain things, certain ideas very dearly, once our eyes are free from logs or scales and we can see with eyes of faith. The Apostle Paul articulates some of these ideas so well in his letter to the people at Philippi – “whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing commendable – excellence worthy of praise – stick with these things. Focus on them, practice them (because they do not often seem to be our first responses to other people and events) and pray on these things.

So perhaps if we clear up our own spiritual vision, our judgment might soften just a bit, or we might be able to make that gracious space so very much needed in our relationships in the world, today. So let’s look at these ideas from our scripture and see if we can find a way to make them relevant in our lives, today.

What we truly value as people of faith, what I believe that Paul means is that these ideas of honor, justice and something pure, are what is possible in the spiritual space between us, these are virtues of relationship through the God of love and they are worthy of our prayer and thought. If we bring them into focus with our intentionality, we are focusing on what Paul instructs - Focusing on what is honorable, just, pleasing and pure – spiritual realities that we can embrace because they give us a sense of well-being, of belonging, connectedness and I think they animate our living to care for one another. We sleep well because we can know we participated in honor and justice and *that which is pure*, and let’s talk about “pure”. By this I believe Paul means someone in relationship gets to the spiritual root of an issue or moment, that is the pure thing. That is what is so instructive about being around young children – they only think and behave in the moment of the spiritual root of things – it is all they know how to do. If it is icky, they cry. If it is pleasing, they smile and it lights up a room. If you have even been around a little one, you know this joy of presence.

For adults, we have to remember that pure part, and it takes practice and intention, you have to decide that the spiritual root is important enough to seek.//// Sometimes the spiritual root is hard to find when suffering is all you see, sense, or encounter.

The thing is, Pain, is just pain – it “pushes people to the edge and brings up fundamental questions like, Why? //// And how can we fix this?/// And, you also know, that when we are pushed, even if not by choice, we grow.

You know about pain, and you also know it bring out the best along with the worst in people. The Hebrews hold the Exodus as a central story of faith – where God led the suffering people through a royal “fugitive named Moses to free them and used pillars of fire and parted waters to have them reach the promised land. Islam began in a cave outside the desert city of Mecca, where the prophet Muhammad prayed to God for some solution to the tribal warfare that was tearing the people apart. And Christianity began when Jesus emerged from his own wilderness experience to minister to the suffering of an occupied people, occupied by Rome and their fear that God had abandoned them.”¹ Pain, as Barbara Brown Taylor sees it, “begs for change.” When we find that changing, perhaps even transcendent moment, do we then have the space in our hearts and minds to focus on what Paul suggests? Paul is writing this letter in response to the quarreling and questioning he heard from the people at Philippi - This is what Paul write back, don’t focus on the fight, get the log out of your eye and focus on what is pleasing and good – what is commendable. It is there, you have to want to find it. Practice looking for it, and you will find it.

For example, if you have even been at the end of the conversation where another person is hollering at you – and I have been, even in churches with the membership in some of my interim work, it takes focus and seeking the pure thing to register with the spiritual truth of the moment. Try to remember, that In addition to whatever it is that triggers the anger, there is often something else that God is sharing with you through that individual. Can we breathe deeply, get beyond the sting of angry countenance pointing at you and see what has brought a dialogue to this point – try

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Altars in the World*, p. 156

to not be distracted by the loud noises coming from the hollerer... it takes work. There is violence being done to you at this moment, and you have choices... what is the pure thing in their moment, in yours? I think about all the violence we encounter in the world today – whether it is first hand or through news headlines and invite you to think about getting beyond that first judgmental reaction – which we all do: “how could those people behave like that?” How could... I was engaged in a dialogue on FB recently and won't do it again, it was really hard, but in the controversy with Rep. Fredrika Wilson and Sgt. La David Johnson's death and the President's call to the widow. Now, the actual headlines aside, issue or not an issue – I have a FB friend from HS, and he and I have some very different perspectives in life and generally, we keep to a respectful dialogue online. I like to hear differences because it helps me learn and grow and practice what I preach, if you can imagine that! But this conversation with some of his FB friends, descended into not just harsh criticism of Rep. Wilson's actions, but into her looks, her style of dress and jewelry, her being – which none of them actually new about. Someone posted a picture of her, in one of her hats that is part of her professional image, with a monkey for the face... Wilson is African American. I was stunned. I interjected stopping just short of racism accusations, saying this sort of interchange stains the soul of the one casting aspersions, and hurts not the object of the hate. That was the pure thing at that moment. It was really hard on the heart – and the responses were, “lighten up Robin, just having fun.” To which I replied, hate is not fun, racism is not light-hearted and is what I wrote and I stopped with that. Disagree with respect, rather than let your demons out to rule the day. Something like that. My HS FB friend apologized and said they were mostly military and get riled up when people speak against the prez or military... as though I did not understand anything about grief, loss, military etc... so I responded with how many military funerals I have officiated, how many family members were in military etc., they stopped including me. The spiritual core of that mess, was racism. I was pastoral, I hope, but it cannot stand and as we have been saying these past few months – we must be brave and in resistance to that hate.

I hope I was firm but gentle, leaving room for grace. Because, prayerfully the log was not stuck in my own eye and man, did those men miss the point. So, it was not easy for me to stand in that online – but there it is. I hope the log was removed from my eye, as I was trying to speak to what is good and pure, to myself and others, just and honorable, where I was called to say it. Do little moments like this, matter? I think it is this//// that really matters, as much as anything. Finding the spiritual root of any moment.

We can use all our senses to notice what is honorable and just, pleasing and pure; and yet, it is confusing! Why is this? It sounds so easy... doesn't it? I find help in noticing the contrast to lift up the point, sometimes we notice what is missing because the contrast is obvious.

I remember a time when a friend went to a UMC conference on ministries with children, in Nashville, it was held at the Brentwood UMC and that is a big, big place with all sorts of ministry going on. She drove this new to her SUV from Minneapolis to Nashville, listening to books and music together the whole way, so pleased with life in this comfy car. It was the second car she had purchased from the used car lot of a luxury dealer, and this sales guy was nice to help, she said he had made sure the car had new brakes, all fluids right etc., all was well. It did need one thing, she had driven it for about a month and it had 3K new miles on it with this trip, so she was determined to keep it running well – she took it to the dealer in Nashville for this oil change. They took us over to the Brentwood church as a courtesy and said they would pick her/us up at the end of the day. Super!

She gets a call midday, from the mechanic who said, she needed new brakes all the way around. All the way around! She rather panicked and said, do nothing till I call you back: she called, the sales guy in MPLS... ..he said – get the car out of their fast, of course we did the brakes... etc. she got a ride to the dealer, spoke to the manager and told him the story. After reviewing the vehicle, he returned to her apologetic and contrite. We both knew this was not an honorable situation. She said just please

give me the car – and drove off. What a mess – I know what it was, single smiley white lady, pastor person, what does she know about cars? I have had this happen to me with vehicles, too. So, I listened to her anger, of course, we prayed for them very briefly, something like, God forgive those thieves – even the words without a great deal of sincerity, after asking forgiveness for ourselves for the thoughts we had. We did keep God in the conversation and when it was so raw, the justice pieces and men and cars and single women – it blew up in our conversation on the ride home. So, honor and justice this was not. It was pretty clear. I hope you have not had similar situations, but such is life, encountering this stuff all the time! How to respond?

And we can read into these passages to view that the way people treat one another has been the same for thousands of years, to this moment. I assume why Paul found the need to point it out in response to the information of complaints and concerns he had received in first century Asia minor/Philippi about the house church of believers in that place, learning to live in this new way in the same old world – like every generation since, he was responding to their life concerns. My friend needed Paul's advice in that moment in Nashville, too– because her first thought upon hearing she needed new brakes when she knew the car did not – was not all things pleasing and pure. However, while a good sermon illustration from modern day life, it did not cling to us, harm was not done her, or us, but the stain on the soul of the one stealing? So, you in fact can sense, when something is honorable and something, is not. Even without a phone call to the guy who sold you the car. Did the car guys, miss the point? Did the racists on FB really miss the point?

Do we miss the point if we do not tend to the blurry vision before us....on a daily basis? It is possible – because it is work to care for that internal inventory, that interior work of honor and justice, pleasing and commendable in this moment in time – it is what Paul calls us to because of how he understood the grace of Christ. Do we stand on that threshold every single day of choices to seek out – the good and excellent, to focus on ... good stuff...if you do these things, the peace of God will be

with you. The junk will not cling to you. Paul says that the peace of God will be with you when focusing on honor and excellence... imagine being able to take the peace of God with you where ever you go – because you cleared up your blurry vision with that self-awareness inventory (yanking that big log out of your eye) prayerfully looked at how you can be a peaceful presence, because of your faith in any moment of your life, and through it, care for neighbor addition to caring for self, the spiritual truth as the pure thing rather than get tangled up in the distractions of only being hollered at, lied to, conned, or told to ‘lighten up’ so the racists could have a little fun. It is part of the everyday journey in our lives of spirituality and faith, taking heed to the messages of those whose shoulders we all stand on in this moment in time – to be inspired to not miss the point. The point of course is and always will be, “on Earth as it is in heaven.” So the junk does not have to cling to us, we can deal with things and keep going in faith.

How can **you** affect log removal from your own eyes and focus on the spiritual goodness we are all capable of? I praise God for each one of you as we journey with this focus and goals in our hearts and minds, together, let’s not miss the point. Amen.

Shall we share in this moment of meditative silence and prayer///// moving to the Lord’s prayer that I will lead...