

Attentive Perspective

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1 Kings 17:8-16

Mark 12:38-44

I recently had the opportunity to travel to India for work. It took three flights and 31 hours of travel time to make it from the United States to India. At one point, when the plane was descending towards a layover landing in Dubai, I looked out the window and for just a moment I was looking down on the moon. I could not quite believe my eyes; I had never looked down on the moon before! Just as quickly as it took me to realize what I was seeing, the plane had descended enough to bring us back on level with the moon and then we dropped below it, and my brain could again comprehend the sight of the big round orb hovering overhead in the sky. The whole thing got me thinking about how big of a role perspective plays in even the most basic understandings that we hold as truth in our lives.

Perspective comes in many forms: it is a point of view, it is how we think about, categorize and approach the world around us, it is a literal angle from which, if we are able, we see things in this world, and it is present in literature as stories capture and present insights of a person, place or community. We cannot escape perspective; it is how we measure the world around us and it is how we, in turn, are measured in the world by others.

Every moment of our lives is housed in context. Into that moment each of us carries a sort of individual life dictionary created out of our past experiences and our current ideas and beliefs. We use that life dictionary to help us define the

present moment and we bump it up against other peoples' lives to help us learn new things because their experiences have been different than ours and so their dictionary contains a different set of terms. Because there are so many dictionaries in play in any given setting – we may constantly have to define and then redefine our understandings and actions within that context so that we can effectively interact.

While in India I was doing some training and in a classroom setting there are lots of opportunities to verify that folks understand what is being taught. When I would ask do you understand – I would get a lot of verbal yeses, but the heads in the classroom would be going back and forth with what looked to me like a sort of angled head shake meaning no. I was confused – so I would ask again, do you understand, and again I would hear yes but see no. My life dictionary was encountering a mismatch, and I needed to get more information so I could revise it. I asked a co-worker about the cultural signals for declaring yes and no, and he shook his head up and down for yes and side to side for no – so I was even more confused. I then asked him why it seemed like a lot of folks were saying yes, but then shaking their heads side to side he just smiled and said some people do that too. I had to adapt my life dictionary in light of these experiences so that I could effectively interact in the training environment at work! As a side note, I later learned that another interpretation of that side to side head shake indicates a person who is in two minds about something – they may cognitively understand it, but they are still in process of letting it sink into their being.

Perspective plays a big role in how we interact with the world around us and as people striving to live out some sort of journey of faith – that faith plays a significant role in shaping those interactions. Faith has the ability to both enhance and challenge how we approach the world. Our faith is embodied in our relationships with God and each other. Those relationships are a give and take of ideas and emotions and, if we are open, they help us grow and see life in new and exciting ways. In choosing to walk in faith we make the choice to strive to see as God would have us see. That is seeing not from our own understandings, but instead fixing our perspective on God so that God can open us up to new ways of thinking and move us to unexpected actions.

Look at the story of Elijah and the widow we heard this morning in the 1st Kings reading. Here is a story telling two perspectives of a desperate situation where faith weighs in and moves both parties to action. These actions do not seem logical from a perspective of basic survival needs, however, the actions are the best options from a perspective that takes into account God's faithful promise of continued provision and care. Elijah, the widow and her son are all in need of one of the most basic essential ingredients of life – food. Due to a drought that is ravaging the land, Elijah has no food of his own, and the widow has only enough left to make a final meal for her son and herself and is then prepared to lie down and die.

Elijah, in need of any food, asks the widow for a piece of bread, and even after finding out that she has very little left for her family, instead of being the good martyr and letting others have what little is left of the food he selfishly asks

for her to go on and make the food she was prepared to make and bring him the first piece! But this is not a selfish action in light of the promise of God which Elijah makes known to the widow “For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” Elijah is acting out of faith in that promise and is extending an offering of hope to the widow and her son. And, what does the widow do? She accepts that offering of hope and faith. In spite of what appears to be certain death in her immediate future for not only herself, but also her child, she makes a choice. Whether she makes that choice out of desperation or determination we do not know, but she too chooses to approach the moment with a faith fixed on the vision of that promise, and she goes and bakes and brings the first food to Elijah. And God is faithful in return, providing food for all of them, for many days. Both Elijah and the widow were attentive to the presence of God and the dynamic factors of the situation and chose to respond from a perspective of faith.

How can we also learn to keep our perspective fixed on God in all situations so that we are lead to act in faithful ways? One option I have learned is from the visual arts where perspective is used as a tool to create depth. One method of doing this is through what is called linear perspective. Linear perspective relies on a fixed point of view versus a constantly shifting viewpoint which is what we experience in our daily lives. In linear perspective there is a point designated in the image where all lines converge – this is called the vanishing point. When using this system of perspective – it creates an image

where things that are supposed to appear closer to us are larger than things that are supposed to be in the distance. I tell you about this method of perspective, because sometimes I like to envision God as the vanishing point in my perspective on faith. If I am attentive to aligning my vision towards God then God can make the most important things come to the forefront and draws the distractions and less important things into the distance. In doing so, I become aware of what to focus on and I can also start to see when things that should be in the distance are taking up too much space and I can actively work to realign my perspective.

Perspective can be a tricky business as my encounter with the moon on the airplane shows, from the right angle almost anything looks possible. In fact, this past summer Becky and I were with some friends at Bengies – a drive in theatre in Baltimore to see a screening of the movie Brave. Before the movie there was a short film called La Luna, in which a young boy is in training under his father and grandfather to care for the moon. At one point, the young boy pulled out a ladder, which filled the screen from top to bottom and started climbing it towards the moon. From our parking spot on the grounds of the theatre, the boy's ladder was in perfect alignment with the real moon which was hanging right above the top of the screen. In our experience of that moment the perfect alignment of perspective allowed two worlds to collide as art mixed with life to create a magic visual gift for us.

It is important to be open to the gifts and cautious of changes that perspective can bring. Being open to the positive power of perspective allows us

to experience unexpected moments and see things in new ways. Yet being somewhat cautious about what perspective we choose reminds us to continue to strive to fix our focus on God so that we can act securely out of faith and not out of illusions. For we, as humans, are susceptible to suggested changes in perspective, which is beautiful and frightening. It is beautiful when openness to different perspectives enhances our relationships with others by promoting understanding across the divide of differences. It is beautiful when we learn new and unexpected things and see in new ways that help us grow closer to God and to each other. It is beautiful when a shift in perspective can bring about healing or allow a small space for grace. Yet, this human susceptibility to opinion and influence can be frightening when we accept new perspectives without intentional consideration of those perspectives. It can be frightening when tunnel vision is used in irresponsible ways to bully people into a single point of view. It can be frightening when we fall into the trap of forgetting that ours is not the only valid perspective in any given situation, regardless of how noble. This power of perspective to enhance or harm us is why it is so important for us to practice what I am calling attentive perspective.

To practice attentive perspective is to be aware of the context of any given situation and to be mindful in one's approach to that situation. It means that we must be active in continuously working with our life dictionaries to determine how we will receive the multitude of messages life sends us and, in turn, how we will act on those messages. We have all had to be on our guard in recent months as we waded through another electoral season, where perspectives were presented

to us as facts in the hopes of capturing an unquestioned place in our systems of belief. But to be attentive to perspective is to acknowledge how our own points of view are interpreting and being manipulated by a moment and to remain faithfully engaged in intentionally choosing a response to that moment.

Jesus gives us an example of being attentive to perspective in Mark 12. Sitting down and watching people putting their offering into the offering box, he is not merely concerned with the amount of money each person offers. Many offer large sums, which is lovely when looked at from the perspective of the physical needs of the synagogue, but that isn't the perspective Jesus is looking from. What Jesus notices is the context of the person in relation to their offering. When the widow comes to the offering box and drops in only two small coins, he is mindful of her circumstances and can see that she has made an offering of all she has and, in doing so, he is able to see the depth of her faith.

My trips to India challenged my perspectives in many ways each day that I was there and continues to do so, just as all of our life experiences do. They linger and shape who we are. While there, I had the opportunity to visit the Taj Mahal, an amazingly beautiful building created out of a desire to express a King's deep and sincere love for his departed wife. Any good tour guide will reinforce over and over to you that the Taj Mahal is first and foremost a love story. On the outer walls of the Taj Mahal are columns of Arabic lettering made of inlaid marble and the letters are smaller at the bottom of the wall than they are at the top so that when you stand and look up they all appear to be the same size. There was intention in building the Taj Mahal, in many respects, but the fact that the

intention included a detailed awareness of the literal perspective in the final outcome speaks to depth of attentiveness involved in the love that inspired that building.

May we be as intentional in our attentiveness to perspectives within us and around us on our faith journey, for our journey too is a story of love.