

Enlighten the Eyes of Our Heart

In the first two verses of today's reading, Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians. He commends them for their faith and for their love toward the saints. First I want to make a comment about the word saints. When Paul uses that word he means the community of believers. So Paul commends the Ephesians for their faith and for the love of each other and for all those in the church.

So, we too are saints. We are saints, not because we are perfect, but because Jesus makes us saints.

Saints. That's pretty cool, huh? But wait...it gets even better. Look, there towards the end...God has put all things under Jesus' feet and made him the head of all things...for the church! For us! All so we can be Christ's body...so we can be the earthly representatives of the risen Christ.

It might be even more amazing than what we read last week...all those blessings and everything God planned to give us before God even knew what we would be like!

God appears to be seriously willing to gamble on us. But if we're to be trusted as Christ's body here on earth... then there's some responsibility that goes with that.

Learning to live into that responsibility is what most of Paul's letter is about.

So let's back up again. Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians' faith and their love of neighbor. But they haven't like graduated or anything.

He goes on with a prayer asking God to grant them wisdom and revelation as they come to know Jesus. And Paul prays that their eyes of their heart be enlightened. They still have some learning and maturing in faith to do as they grow into Christ's body.

What does it mean to have the eyes of one's heart enlightened? What wisdom and revelation is needed? And how do we get it?

According to Paul, wisdom and revelation comes from knowing Jesus. As we know Jesus more and more, as Jesus is revealed to us, the eyes of our heart are enlightened. When the eyes of our heart are enlightened we can see deeper than just what's on the surface of things. We can see the God dwelling within us and within others.

So, let's set off on a journey to know Jesus. Where do we start? Who would be our travel companions? How do we recognize Jesus?

The first stop is the Bible. But you know lots of people read the Bible and come up with totally different ideas about this faith thing...and even about Jesus.

Some dismiss it altogether. Some come up with a version of Christianity that's about as far from Jesus as you can get...vindictive, judgmental, self-righteous. And it's not the easiest book ever to read.

If we want to know Jesus better, it seems reasonable to start with one of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. John's probably the hardest to understand and I think Luke the easiest. Mark is the shortest. Matthew seems harsher sometimes. But Jesus and his teachings are there.

The book of Revelation also has Jesus speaking through a series of visions. It's not an easy place to start though.

Reading the Bible on your own may well still leave you not knowing Jesus. A couple things can help us.

The first is to decide what lens...or what framework...you want to read through. In Lutheran theology, we talk about reading scripture through the lens of the cross...we look for the pattern of death and resurrection, even in the Old Testament books.

It can also be helpful to pick out a verse from scripture that seems to sum up what Jesus was about...some people pick John 3:16 – for God so loved the world God sent the son Jesus to save the world.

One I often use is something Jesus said – “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Another of my favorites actually comes from Revelation: See, I am making all things new.

Then as you read the rest of the gospels, or even the rest of the whole Bible, you can see how what you read fleshes out that nutshell. You can ask, how does this passage show new life coming from what was dead? How does it reveal abundant life in Christ? How does it show God's love?

The next thing that can help us know Jesus better is especially important when you read something that doesn't seem like good news to you. It's to ask “for whom is this good news?”

And for that, we will likely need some companions for our journey. It is much easier to understand the good news – the gospel of Jesus Christ - if you read the Bible in the company of other people...especially people who are very different from you.

Our understanding of the work of Jesus grows dramatically when we read scripture in the company of feminists, or womanists, or African American or Latin American liberation preachers. It's nice if we could be in their actual living company, but their books, articles, and videos help too.

The eyes of our hearts can be dramatically enlightened to the struggles of others by trying to know Jesus from their standpoint. We are often very tempted to keep the eyes of our heart focused just on our experience and our own perspective. But we can't fully know Jesus that way.

That brings us to the another important way of knowing Jesus. This one comes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. When we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison, we have come to know Jesus. When we have come face to face with the humanity of the downtrodden and the marginalized, it is there we have seen Jesus...we have come to know Jesus.

And finally, Jesus can be known through our rituals and prayer...in the sacrament of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. Jesus can be known through the community of saints with whom we gather for worship, whether in person or by Zoom. The eyes of our hearts are enlightened when we love the people in our community, even if we don't really care for their political views or some other thing about them.

If we are to be the body of Christ in the world, we will have to have the eyes of our heart enlightened by life with one another...by studying scripture together and sharing our experience of God with each other.

Long story short, I don't think the eyes of our heart can be enlightened just by a me and Jesus approach. It takes a village to raise a true Christian.

And when the eyes of our heart are enlightened, then we can see the hope...we can see a hope that transcends the tough stuff going on in our world...

When the eyes of our heart are enlightened, we can grasp the riches of this inheritance we've been so freely given...

When the eyes of our heart are enlightened, we can know the power of life over the power of death.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul shares a very lofty view of the church...of us. It should feel a bit daunting.

But as we come to know Christ better and better, when the eyes of our heart are enlightened, we can truly be Christ's body, Christ's representatives on earth. And we can share with the world that deep hope, that rich inheritance, and that power to bring life out of death.