

May 28, 2017

Scripture: John 17:1-11

Message: A Matter of Perspective

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Several years ago, when the boys were in 2nd and 4th grades, we went on a family vacation to Disney World. Turns out, the very first day of our Disney adventures, as we were heading to Epcot Center, was the very same day that a hurricane made landfall on the Florida coast. Orlando, too, was hit with effects of the storm. However, since we were inland, and the forecast was for no more than periods of heavy rain throughout the day...the Magical World of Disney continued. We simply covered ourselves in our newly purchased, bright yellow, Mickey Mouse rain slickers and forged ahead. It was a delightful day, with cooler temperatures and blessedly short lines, thanks to the weather.

That was our story. Rev. Dawn Chesser, however, tells the story of a recent beach vacation with her husband. They too were in the path of a hurricane. However, their experience was a little different. For one thing, they were staying in an oceanfront rental cottage, and their hurricane was forecast to make landfall at their exact location. It made for a tense few days, as they watched the progress of the hurricane and waited for the call to evacuate. That call never came. By the time the hurricane drew near to their beach, it was downgraded to a tropical storm. So, they made the decision to ride it out. When the eye of the storm made landfall, they watched from their safe, dry, and now secure rental cottage.

It was quite the experience, made even more surreal by the strange, tiny bits of grayish white substance that was blowing through the air all around the cottage. The stuff was hitting the house. It was hitting their car. It was collecting in piles on the grass and the porch. It was thick and expansive as it swirled through the air. Rev. Chesser and her husband had no idea what they were seeing. Perhaps it was the seeds of some beach plant, like the cottonwood fluffs that fly around their home. Perhaps some sort of swirling hail. Perhaps some sort of churned up oil or detergent or chemical spill. Because of the limitations of their personal experiences, they had no idea what they were looking at or how to respond.

They learned later that the strange substance was seafoam hitting the sand dunes, blowing apart into bits and blasting up into the swirling air. The entire beachfront was bursting with millions of fragments of seafoam! But the Chessers had never lived by the sea. So, when they saw it, they didn't understand.

Each one of us, no matter how hard we might try, is limited to some degree by our own perspective. We can only see and understand that which our personal experience gives us a reference point to see and understand. Today's passage from John takes place following the Last Supper, on the night before Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. Jesus is at the end of what theologians call his Farewell Discourse. He has washed his disciples' feet...a culturally upside act which the disciples did not understand. Jesus told them that he was going away and they couldn't follow him...yet. They had been following him for three years! It made no

sense that they wouldn't still be able to do so. They didn't understand. He spoke of rooms and mansions and making ready, saying that they already knew where he was going. They didn't understand. Jesus talked of leaving, of them not seeing him, of them seeing him again, then leaving again, and a comforter or helper coming when everything would be clear. And they're thinking, "Whaaa? What in the world is he talking about?" They didn't understand. Then, even when they finally said "Oh we've got it now. We know what you're saying. Everything comes together in you." Even then, Jesus said, "Oh, you understand, do you? In just a few short hours you will be running for your lives. Abandoning me." They still didn't understand. Their perspectives were too limited.

Rather than go into a long explanation of what he was talking about, Jesus then ended their time together, before leaving the upper room and going to the Garden of Gethsemane, with a prayer. And this particular prayer wasn't the prayer for himself, for his own strength and perseverance. This prayer was for his disciples. He prayed for the people God gave him from the world. He blessed them. Commissioned them to carry on the work he began, but which now would be in their hands to continue.

But here's the thing. The disciples were not Jesus. They were flawed human beings with limited perspectives. The ministry Jesus blessed them to carry on was placed in the care of people—men and women who could not possibly see the world from Jesus' perspective, through the eyes of God. What's more, they couldn't see the world through the perspectives of those that they would encounter on their apostolic journeys—journeys that would take them places that they never dreamed they'd go. Before people of power. Into strange new lands and cultures. Individually, the disciples would never be able to do what Jesus had done. Only together, with the wisdom and perspective of one another to help them as individuals, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, could they continue Jesus' ministry.

So, Jesus told them, over and over, love one another. If you love one another, it will be enough. And he prayed for their courage. Their guidance. Their protection. He prayed for their wisdom. He prayed for their oneness with God. And he prayed for the ones that they would reach with Jesus' message of love, and mercy and grace.

Way back, when I was 26 years old and I first received my call to ministry, I had a pretty simplistic understanding of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Some would likely call it a restricted perspective. I think, when I first heard my call, that the simultaneous sense of being told, "Go...but not yet", had a great deal to do with my need to learn and grow and increase my perspective of faith, as it did anything else. And I did learn and grow, and began to see and understand God in new and broader ways.

Then, when I started seminary at Asbury, I learned even more about how to be, and the importance of being, a *thinking* Christian. A follower of Jesus who invites and welcomes God to show me new perspectives so that I can release God from any comfortable box that I like to contain God in.

Then, I came here, and God has broadened my perspective even more. I have come to appreciate even more than I did before, that my ministry, and even my own personal faith journey, is restricted to some extent by my own limited vantage point. And I've come to value the way I experience God at work in sometimes surprising, and always remarkable ways, by connecting with others outside of my theological comfort zone.

Let's face it. This is not a cookie cutter church. You are not a predictable body of believers. And that's not a bad thing. God is at work here because you desire to be intentional about not putting God in a comfortable box. You don't, or at least you try not to, create God in your own image...but try to allow God to create you in God's image. You are intentional, or at least you try to be, open to a broader perspective of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the world. I encourage you to hold tightly to this value...and not just in word or mission statement. Value it personally. Individually. Because God will continue to surprise you when you seek to understand and respect the viewpoints of others. That doesn't mean you'll always agree, of course. It does mean that you will be challenged, on occasion, to understand how God's Spirit works in surprising and broader ways. Sometimes, you will find that you're better able to define and articulate your own beliefs. Sometimes, you may even find your beliefs shift a little. Either way, you are drawn closer to God and to one another when you broaden your perspective by connecting with others in curious, self-giving ways.

When Jesus prayed for His disciples, He certainly knew they would be in contact with so many other people who had so many other perspectives ...and that his message of love and grace would be relevant to every perspective. I believe that the church is at its worse when it is a closed set, and excludes people whose perspectives are different. We do more harm, as followers of Christ, when we refuse to recognize that God is at work in other persons, simply because they don't think or believe as we do. Jesus never shut people out, and people flocked to Him because of it.

We help each other experience God more deeply when we expand our vision. This is why it is critical not only that we be one in ministry with other people who share our understanding of faith, but that we seek to be one in ministry with people who have a different view of the world than our own. When we allow, and respect, the perspective of others among God's people, then we become better able to look at the world through the eyes of Christ.

The Chassers were unable to understand the seafoam flowing in the air all around them. The disciples were unable to understand Jesus' words and actions that prepared them for His leaving. In both cases, their perspectives were too limited. The beauty of Jesus' prayer, is that we aren't left alone. We have the Spirit of God. We have one another. And we have any others that cross our paths who invite us, with often different experiences and sometimes opposing viewpoints to our own, to enable us to experience God more fully than we can on our own, or even by isolating ourselves with those who think like we do.

Mother Teresa once said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."¹ Dear Ones, I plead with you, continue to hold tight to your values. Don't just embrace the idea of the words of your mission statement, live them. Those of you who are more conservative, spend time in conversation and study with those who are more progressive. Those of you who are more progressive, don't resist sitting in a Bible study or conversation with your more conservative friends. Wonderful discussions will happen. As your perspective broadens, God will show up in exciting new ways. UCSJ will continue to grow and thrive as a place where people meet the presence of God.

Let us pray. Connecting God, you have created us all as unique reflections of you. All of us are wired differently. Our experiences of you are also unique. Help us to intentionally connect with others, so that we can draw closer into relationship with you and one another.

¹ Sermon Seeds. http://www.ucc.org/sermon_seeds_may_28_2017