

A sermon preached on February 9th, 2020 based upon 1Cornithians 2:1-12 entitled, "Seeing Through the Lens of the Crucified Savior."

When we are born, we experience life directly. But as we grow, we develop lenses through which we see our lives – lenses that filter reality. Our lenses lead us to pay attention to certain things, and to ignore others. They interpret the world in terms of what we come to value and what we regard as unimportant. These lenses are necessary for functioning in this world, but inevitably they distort reality.

Our personal lens is shaped by our genetics – for instance, whether we are an introvert or an extrovert impacts how we experience life. But our lenses are primarily shaped by the people in whose company we live our lives: our family, our friends, the people we meet at school or church or work.

When we are young children the lens through which we see is soft and pliable, which is to say we have a greater openness to changing our lens and seeing life in new ways. But over time our lenses harden, making it increasingly difficult to change the way we perceive reality. Even though our lenses invariably distort reality in ways that can be destructive to ourselves and others, we resist changing them because they are tied so close our sense of who we are – how we identify ourselves and how we fit into this world. To acknowledge that our personal lens distorts can feel like a serious threat. The oft quoted question, "*Would you rather be right or happy?*" refers to the destructive need we have to believe that our personal lens alone reveals truth. Our lenses are so deeply ingrained that generally we don't even acknowledge we have them. We assume that the way we see life is rational and true – that it is others whose vision is distorted.

This is why as social scientists point out arguments with others rarely change peoples' point of view – our lens – because arguments usually aren't about a search for the truth – they're really about staving off insecurity and staking our claim regarding how we understanding ourselves and our place in this world.

We gravitate towards people whose lenses are closer to our own, and avoid the company of people whose lenses seem quite different from ours, oftentimes viewing them as threats, even enemies. Our sense of having a place where we belong – a tribe of people to whom we feel the connection that is essential to thrive as a human being is tied into this sense of a shared lens with which to see life.

This in turn creates a pressure towards conformity within the group in which we've found a sense of belonging. If we experiment with points of view that

challenge parts of the prevailing communal lens, we risk rejection and the possibility of finding ourselves left all alone. Unconsciously we sense the unwritten rule: *if we want to remain a member of our group, then don't question the lens.*

The line of reflection I've been discussing arose this week for me from two sources.

One was the rather disturbing week we just had in terms of national politics and leadership – disturbing, I suspect regardless of your political affiliation. Political opinions are only one piece of the lens with which we look at the world, but at the present moment they seem to be particularly charged. I have my own points of view and am capable of my own strong feelings about what has been taking place but this morning I just want to focus on the deepening sense of division our political life is creating, and the threat this poses to relationships with people we care about.

The other source for my reflections has been the words we just heard from the Apostle Paul who wrote his letter to the church in Corinth in response to the distressing news he had received that the folks there were dividing into hostile factions.

Paul's backstory is particularly pertinent in that he underwent arguably the most dramatic and consequential transformation anyone has ever had of the basic lens with which he saw life, the ramifications of which have rippled across human history ever since.

Paul started out as Saul the Pharisee which meant that at the center of his lens was the conviction that God had clearly revealed God's will in the hundreds of laws recorded in the Torah. In order to remain in God's favor careful attention was required to live in obedience to these laws. This way of seeing life led to a clear division of people: some were righteous and others were unrighteous. If you intended to live righteously you were required to avoid contact with the unrighteous. With his brilliant mind and strong will Saul followed the path his lens set before him in a way that steadily garnered the respect and admiration of the peers with whom he shared this particular lens.

As far as we know, Saul never met Jesus during his earthly life. When Saul heard that certain Jews were going around telling everybody who would listen that Jesus was the messiah, the anointed one of God it made Saul intensely angry. Seeing life through his lens it was inconceivable that a wandering rabbi who hung out with unholy sinners and then died a shameful death nailed to a cross could be God's beloved. God would never allow such

a thing to happen, and his horrid death was a clear indication of God's rejection of this Jesus. From Saul's point of view, it was blasphemy to claim such a man could possibly be the messiah. And so Saul set about persecuting these "blasphemers" in an attempt to silence them. In doing so, he was confident he was pleasing to God.

And then one day while traveling on the road to the city of Damascus where Saul intended to root out the Jewish Christians there, suddenly a blazing light brought Saul to his knees, temporarily blinding him. Clearly in the presence of the divine, Saul heard a voice address him: "*Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?*" Saul answered, "*Who are you, Lord?*" "*I am Jesus,*" was the voice's reply and with that his old lens began to collapse. Clearly in the wrong, Saul assumed in short order he would be struck dead by a lightning bolt as punishment for the evil he had committed – the fate his old lens indicated he deserved. But to his utter astonishment all he encountered was love – amazing, transformative grace.

After three days of blindness Saul's sight was restored when God sent a Christ follower to him. In time, Saul became Paul, the primary apostle to the Gentile world.

As Paul reflected on the mysterious revelation that had been given to him, he saw that the attempt to achieve righteousness through works of the law was doomed. We can go through constant outward motions in an attempt to keep God's laws and yet inwardly be cut off from God by the condemnation and hate that holds our hearts in bondage.

Paul saw that it was impossible for us to work our way up to heaven, so God had reached down to us with the light of grace into the deepest darkness of our lives. The love that moved God to do this was deeper and broader and wider than either the Jews or the brilliant Greek philosophers could have ever conceived through their lenses.

Paul paid dearly for this radical transformation of his lens. He lost all of his old friends and the status and respect he had enjoyed. He became "*the enemy*" – the object of great hostility. The rejection he endured would likely have been unbearable were it not for the new friendships he began to forge within the emerging Christian community.

Paul traveled from city to city sharing the Gospel, and his preaching gave birth to fledgling churches. One of these churches was in Corinth. In our reading Paul references the lens through which he viewed those with whom he shared the Gospel when he first visited Corinth. "*I resolved to know nothing except Jesus the Messiah, and him crucified.*" Where once obedience

to the laws of the Torah held the center place, now he saw the world through the story the story of Jesus and his willingness to embrace the shame of the cross – the place where God’s love is most clearly revealed.

This is what we are called to aspire to as Christians – to come to see life through the same lens. So what does it mean to see life through the lens of Jesus, the crucified messiah?

It means, first off living with humility recognizing the limitations of our earthly lenses. Later in this same letter Paul will speak about how *"now we know only in part."* It is only later when we pass through the veil that we will know in full, even as we have been fully known. So in the meantime we are to recognize that others we instinctively disagree may be seeing things we are missing. There is much I don’t see clearly -- much I don’t understand – but as Paul said, I know the most important thing – the love God revealed for all people in the crucified savior, and this knowledge compels me to love the persons with whom I am in disagreement. If there is in fact something I know that somebody else doesn’t know and is resisting knowing, if I talk to this person in a condescending manner without love then I am just a *"banging gong or a clanging cymbal."* Without love, I am nothing.

The new lens means we are called to give up the old categories of "righteous" and "unrighteous" – the "us against them" mentality that afflicts the human race. The love revealed in Jesus is a love for every single person, so we no longer can view anyone as unworthy of our love.

And the new lens changes the way we view politics. Paul speaks of a new wisdom and a new power that was unknown to the rulers of this world – the power of God’s love that does not coerce but works on the inside in human hearts.

Politics are very important, and Jesus’ ministry had political consequences. He spoke out against injustice and was perceived to be a threat to the people who held political power. But he turned down the devil’s temptation to have his ministry be about acquiring political power. He chose love rather than the power of an earthly king to coerce people.

For us this means that as important as politics are and the issues of injustice that must be addressed, politics are not the MOST important thing. This extraordinary love revealed in Jesus is the most important thing. And disagreements over politics should never keep us from loving one another.

Paul also mentions that the people in who hold power in the present age are passing away. As Martin Luther King was fond of saying, the arc of justice is long but it bends towards love. Any ruler -- no matter how seemingly powerful and resistant to justice they may be in the present age -- will eventually lose his or her grip on power. No one escapes death. Our hope arises from a deeper place than the present political order, so we need not despair, nor lose friends over political arguments.

And finally, seeing life through the lens of Jesus the crucified messiah says something about the necessity of embracing vulnerability. God didn't play it safe when God chose to be born in a barn to a homeless, refugee family. God revealed God's self most clearly in a place that the lenses of this world judged as altogether shameful – in a savior laying down his life in love for all people in the utter humiliation of the cross for the sole purpose of melting the hardness of our hearts and drawing us back into relationship with himself and one another.

If you are going to love whole-heartedly, you're going to risk rejection and abuse. So when the divisive currents of our present age pressure us to choose between the narrow lenses of two inflexible orthodoxies, we are called to trust the love that undergirds us by refusing this false dichotomy, risky though it may be.

In the end, what matters most is to live out of the love of God that ties us all together as one.