



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 6, 2019
EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Faith Seeking Understanding Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

On a warm, partly sunny afternoon last July, a couple from South Carolina celebrated their anniversary with a visit to Wrigley Field to see the Chicago Cubs and the St. Louis Cardinals play ball. Darker clouds soon gathered, however, when Cubs first base coach Will Venable threw a foul ball to a boy who was sitting in the first row. The boy missed the ball which rolled under his seat and was picked up by a man in the second row who gave it to a woman seated beside him.

Thunderclouds broke as video of the event went viral on social media. The man was berated on Twitter and other formats for stealing the ball from this little boy. One man, whose son was in Seattle watching the game on TV, received a text asking, “Dad, are you next to this jerk who stole that ball from that kid?” If you happened to see the replay that day, you likely felt the same way. The father answered that he was indeed sitting next to the man but his son had the story all wrong. In truth, he said, “. . . the man gave balls to other kids in the stands and ‘was a great guy.’” A reporter taking a closer look discovered that the man had actually given this little boy a foul ball earlier in the game and had, in fact, shared several foul balls with other children and adults in the stands.¹ Eventually, the clouds parted and the sun shone again.

Light. Illumination. The shredding of darkness. Understanding. These are the gifts of Epiphany. Today is a day to celebrate the sharing of the light of Christ with the world. Today is the day to cheer God’s gift of chasing away the darkness and offering life to all people.

Each year we tell this good news through two stories. First, there is the prophesy of Isaiah which offers hope that the deep darkness which had overshadowed the Hebrew people for so long will be banished by the light of a new day, that is, the coming of the Messiah. We also welcome the magi once again. These sages from the East come every year to remind us that God reaches beyond the borders of a tiny Middle Eastern country to embrace

¹“There May Be More to the Story Behind a Viral Video of a Young Cubs Fan Who Had a Foul Ball Swiped,” *NBC 5 Chicago* (July 23, 2018); available online at: <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/chicago-cubs-fan-foul-ball-child-man-488901771.html>.

all people everywhere. They follow a star whose light takes them past the darkness of King Herod to a beaming baby boy and his humble parents.

On Christmas afternoon, I noticed that our granddaughter Savannah was playing with the creche we have in our living room. She had moved some of the characters and animals around to fit how she thought the scene should look. While we often have the shepherds and their sheep as well as the magi and their camels standing at a respectful distance, Savannah had moved everything closer to the manger so that the wise men stood with the shepherds and animals, all leaning in to get a better look at Jesus. They wanted to see him. They wanted to know who he was and what he was about. They wanted to understand this baby who was born the light of the world.

The magi remind us that we all need the light, we all need illumination and understanding in order to fully appreciate what God is doing in our midst.

In the eleventh century—a thousand years ago—Anselm of Canterbury, a monk and theologian, talked about “faith seeking understanding.” His ideas were based upon those of St. Augustine who had lived over six hundred years earlier. Both believers agreed that knowledge of God is essential for faith in God but that faith in God also causes us to want to know more about God. In other words, faith calls for understanding and understanding deepens faith.

Of course, Jesus taught us that our faith affects not only our relationship with God but our relationships with one another as well. When asked about the greatest commandment of all, Jesus confirmed that we are to “‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). In Savannah’s arrangement of the manger scene, as they press in close to get a better look at Jesus, the magi remind us that we need to take the time, not only to understand God better, but to understand one another as well.

We do make attempts at better understanding one another. On the wall of the Scout hut where my buddies and I learned a lot about life and how to navigate it was a piece of wood on which had been burned the saying, “Great Spirit, help me never to judge another brave until I have walked a mile in his moccasins.” Borrowed from a poem by Mary Lathrap, the phrase is one we often use: “Don’t criticize someone else until you have walked a mile in his

shoes.” In other words, we are to consider the perspective of another person before judging his or her actions. It is good advice . . . if we are good at following it. Apparently, we aren’t.

According to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago, Northeastern University, and Ben Gurion University in Israel, we are not all that good at trying to imagine what another person thinks or why they do what they do. Our own understanding, our particular perspective about life, affects how we perceive other people’s thoughts and actions. The conclusion of the study was that if you want to know what someone is thinking or why they do what they do—ask them.² Nothing can beat direct research, that is, communication. The best way to understand someone else is to talk with them, ask them questions of genuine interest, get to know their story.

Last winter, in a segment on NPR’s *Weekend Edition Saturday*, Bilal Qureshi reviewed the movie *Foxtrot* which is a critique of Israeli society which has long been trapped in perpetual war. At one point, actor Lior Ashkenazi talked about the difficulty people have in talking about the wounds they suffer as a result of war, whether or not those injuries are physical. He said, “successful, high-functioning Israelis, like his character, didn't talk about their experiences . . . But deep inside, there's a word for it in Hebrew — it's *srita*: They have a scratch in their soul.”³

Most of us have scratches in our souls, wounds caused by unfair circumstances of life, by missed opportunities, by the actions of other people, and by our own mistakes and misjudgments. One of the best holiday examples of someone whose wounds caused him to be unfair, even unjust, is that of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ classic story, *A Christmas Carol*.

As you remember, the story begins with everyone being afraid of and offended by Scrooge, everyone except his nephew whose love of his uncle overrides any offense the blustery old man offers. The nephew appeals to the spirit of Christmas and the ties of family to get Scrooge to share Christmas dinner with him and his family. Scrooges refuses, but, as we know, the Spirits

²Ephrat Livni, “There’s only one way to truly understand another person’s mind,” *Quartz* (July 3, 2018); available online at: <https://qz.com/1319441/theres-only-one-way-to-truly-understand-another-persons-mind/>.

³Bilal Qureshi, “In 'Foxtrot,' A Filmmaker Captures The 'Bleeding Soul Of Israeli Society,’” *NPR Weekend Edition Saturday* (March 3, 2018); transcript available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/03/590229511/in-foxtrot-a-filmmaker-captures-the-bleeding-soul-of-israeli-society>.

of Christmas Past, Present, and Future are the ones who really talk to Scrooge, ask him questions, remind him of truths long ignored, and open him to possibilities never considered. Eventually, the “scratches” in Scrooges’ soul are sufficiently healed for him to embrace Christmas for what it truly is and to embrace the people who still want to love him.

What might we learn about someone if we only ask? What scratches might need a dab of the salve of compassion to begin to heal? The person in line behind us, the man or woman sitting in the doctor’s office beside us, the new student in the desk in front of us, the neighbor who just moved in across the street, the person who writes frequent letters to the editor of the paper all have stories to tell. And, like most of us, they would really like to tell them to someone who genuinely cares. Those stories—our stories—help us all understand one another and ourselves a bit better.

Imagine what might have happened if, instead of acting out of fear, Herod had also sought out the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. Had he sought greater understanding, had he taken time to learn the newborn’s story, scores of baby boys would have lived. A waiting nation might have embraced its Savior. A low-tier king might have discovered that there is more to life than presumptive power, lavish surroundings, and violence. John the Baptist might have lived a long life of witness to his Redeemer-Cousin. And we all might have learned by example that it is better to understand than to judge. Faith seeking understanding breaks through the clouds of our presumptive judgements to allow the light of God’s truth to brighten all of our days.

January 6, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We welcome these words of the prophet declaring an end to darkness for we have felt the weight of gloom as so many of our recent days have been wrapped in clouds and rain. We welcome the light of the sun and the lengthening of days. We feel our spirits rise and we understand better the oppressive mood of our spiritual ancestors.

We admit, however, that we cannot fully understand their plight because they were still waiting for the Messiah who has already come to us. They were alienated from their spiritual home while we realize that we can never be alienated from you. They had all but lost their hope, yet we know that true hope was born in the Christ child and lives in our hearts day by day.

Keep these realities alive for us, O God. Illumine our hearts and minds with the light of the Gospel so that we never despair, never feel abandoned, and never forsake the grace that you have given us in Jesus Christ. Keep our spirits vibrant and attuned to your Spirit so that we might live fully engaged in your ministry here and now.

We do ask that you lift the gloom from all who grieve and worry and cannot find hope. Remind them of your care and brighten their days with our visits and attention. Strengthen the weakened bodies and distraught minds of those who are ill and unable to function as they wish. Bring all of the medical resources to their disposal and infuse them with the healing gifts of your Spirit, we pray.

Chase away the clouds which hang over our nation and world, clouds which obscure our vision and prevent us from seeing one another as allies and cause us to act like enemies. Illumine our minds and warm our hearts toward one another so that the light of Christ can show us the way we need to go. Shine the radiance of your love upon us, we pray, so that we, too, might reflect the bright light of your goodness and grace which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.