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Fixing Our Vision  
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Genesis 3:6-9  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 10:21-37

Cynicism and doubt are the quicksand in which faith and hope and love can drown.

Legalism, nit-picking, criticism, and negativity are the hammer and chisel that can destroy others and eventually ourselves.

These evils creep into our lives through our eyes and ears to infect our hearts and minds and soul and strength.

They come in through our eyes and ears because those are the most direct ways that we experience life. They form what I will refer to as our vision of the world around us. This is not literal vision of course, but our perspective, our outlook, our sense of the world in which we live.

In sharp contrast to this is the way that Jesus would have us experience the world around us. Although he spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven quite often, Jesus was equally concerned with how we lived this life on earth. His interactions with others – even those who were against Him – are instructive for us as we seek to follow His ways.

Much has been written and talked about the three “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love. These three virtues are interconnected and rely on each other for support and growth.

Consider faith as the first piece. It is with faith that we claim the belief in God, in the gift of grace through Jesus Christ, in the claims of the resurrection and the promise of eternal life.

Once we have that faith (which is a gift) we will begin to have hope growing within us. We have hope in the possibility of a better world after this one, but also hope that we were created by a loving God who gave this life to us. We have hope that our lives have meaning and purpose. We have hope that we can make a difference.

With that faith and hope, we begin to experience life in a different way. We are filled with love, joy, and thanksgiving to God for the gifts of grace, faith, and hope that we have received.

Faith, hope, and love form a lens through which we see the world, if we will use it.

But how easy it is to set that lens aside for another. We can view the world through other lenses of course. We can look at others and see their faults, their failings, their flaws. It is the easiest thing in the world to do. It is always easier to destroy something, and examples are easy to come by. Consider the amount of time it would take to build a wall. Stones or bricks must be selected, mortar mixed and applied and carefully put together. It takes time, patience and some degree of skill to piece it together.

On the other hand, just about anyone can walk by and knock it down in a fraction of the time it took to build, without needing any more skill than the ability to swing a sledgehammer.

And so we come to today's Gospel reading. There is yet another critic who has come to see if he can trick Jesus. We aren't told his motivation, only that he stood to test Jesus.

We are told that the man who asked the question was a lawyer. In the original context we might understand this man to have been an expert in the laws of the church, not necessarily a lawyer as we think of them today. We might even be able to think of him as one of Jesus' colleagues – someone who also taught in the temple as Jesus did. Perhaps this man considered himself to be something of a rival to Jesus.

Whatever the reasons, surely Jesus was aware of them when he stood to ask, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, always skillful at avoiding a trap, turned the question back on the one who asked it.

"Have you studied the Scriptures?" came Jesus' response.

"Yes, I know what the Scripture says," said the man, suddenly on the defensive.

"Good, then do what it says," concluded Jesus.

Now it could have ended there, but the man could not let it end there. He wanted to justify himself, we are told. We might read that as saying that he didn't want to admit defeat.

Then came the question that revealed the condition of the man's heart. "Who is my neighbor?"

The question reveals the legalism that bound him. The lens through which this man experienced the world was narrow and constricted. He wanted to know the *requirements* – "Who am I required to love? Can you spell it out for me?"

Fortunately for that man and for us, the lens through which Jesus looks at us is filled with love and grace and compassion. Therefore rather than lashing out in anger, Jesus spoke to the man with a parable:

*A man fell into the hands of robbers...*

By the end of the story the lesson is clear. We are not to ask what it *required*, but what is *possible*. Was it required for the Samaritan to care for the man laying by the side of the road? Those who first heard the story would have said no, in fact they would have expected the Samaritan to ignore the man.

Jesus calls into question our expectations.

Can you remember the first time you read this story? I can still remember the shock I felt to hear that two people (the priest and the Levite) who were supposed to be devoted to God could just ignore the man. Of course in time someone explained to me that given the culture of the time, the priest and Levite would not have intervened because of the purity laws that prohibited them from coming into contact with blood or dead bodies.

Yet Jesus chose to include them in the story.

Surely Jesus knew the purity laws and the customs of the people. He knew what was expected of the priest and the Levite. But still Jesus included them in the story. Why?

Jesus wanted to challenge the way the people thought about expectations and requirements. Here are 3 people who could be expected to ignore this man's suffering, yet one of them ignored the expectations and offered to help.

"Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"The one who showed him mercy."

"Go and do likewise."

*Go and break expectations. Don't be satisfied with what people will accept.*

Jesus wanted to change the lens through which we experience the world.

It was not that the priest and the Levite did not see the man at the side of the road. Jesus clearly indicates that they did see him, but they failed to act.

We can understand their hesitancy to get involved, can't we? Forget their position in society for a moment, and consider them just as two ordinary people traveling down the road.

The first one came by and saw the man and looked away, perhaps thinking to himself, "What is the world coming to? That could have been me!" and turned away hoping to forget what he had seen.

The second man came by and saw the man and shook his head.. Perhaps he thought, "How could God allow this to happen? Why didn't he stop this terrible thing from happening?" and he kept on going, hoping no one saw him.

Finally a third man came by. He did not say to himself, "I wonder what this man did to end up like this." He did not blame God for what happened. Instead he stepped in and did what he could to help.

This third man was looking at the world through a different lens than the other two. He was not thinking about what was expected or required of him. As a Samaritan the man would quite possibly have been considered an enemy by the very man he sought to help. He had no way of knowing what the long-term outcome would be. The man, if he recovered, might have been ungrateful or rude. He might have just disappeared into the night once he was better. The man might have spent two days pay only to never see it again.

Apparently none of these concerned the man enough not to help this stranger on the road. He followed the spirit of the law that said "love your neighbor" without asking "Is this man my neighbor?" He followed the law without asking "What is expected of me?"

If we were to gather together and talk about those people in our lives who were most special to us...

If we were to think about what it was about them that made them seem so different...

If we tried to understand the lens through which they experienced the world, we would see that they went through life with eyes like the Samaritan: they were aware of the needs of others and where they could help. They did not worry about *expectations* as much as *possibilities*. They had what we might call spiritual vision – they experienced the world through the eyes of their hearts, hearts that had been touched by the love and grace of God.

If we were to interview those people, I am sure that we would find that they were aware of the generosity that they had received from the hands of others. Those men and women who had touched our lives most deeply were no doubt aware of the God who loved them, the God whose grace had been given to them. And so they were filled with that spirit.

The Apostle Paul wanted this spirit for Christians he had met. He wrote these words to the Ephesians

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a *sprit of wisdom and revelation* as you come to know him *so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened* you may know what is the hope to which he has called you., what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe according to working of his great power.”

That is what Paul wanted for the church, and it is what we must want for ourselves.

We must claim this vision for the eyes of our hearts. We must want to claim the spirit of the law – not the spirit of bondage that steals life from us – but the spirit of love and grace that realizes our connection to one another and seeks to be part of what is good in this world.

It will cost us to do this. It cost the Samaritan to help the man in need, not only financially but emotionally and also strictly in terms of the time and energy he had to devote to this man. The Samaritan had to be willing to follow where the eyes of his heart led him.

What will it cost us? It will be somewhat different for each one of us. We all must set aside the hammer & chisel of criticism and skepticism, all those parts of ourselves that tear down rather than build up. We must pray that God would enlighten the eyes of our hearts and minds that we might know how to follow his simplest and greatest commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Go and do likewise.

*[Dedicated to the memory of  
G. Robert Jacks of Princeton Seminary who helped teach me to get the Word across,  
and to the honor of Rev. Dr. David Hosick, who first encouraged me to try.]*