

Looking Again
Epiphany 3A: 1st Corinthians 1.10-18
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The Rev. Scott Walters

Is there a moment — a conversation, an experience, an encounter — that changed the way you saw something forever? There was one like that for me nearly twenty years ago. And I haven't quite read the Bible the same way since.

I was sitting in the Virginia Seminary Chapel for Morning Prayer, and Roger Ferlo, one of my professors at the time, was sitting a few rows up. Roger is a towering intellect, and he is also a little bit, as my dad used to say of himself, “vertically challenged.” But the ends of the pews in the old VTS chapel were quite tall. This detail is important to the story. Because one of the readings that day was from the book of Revelation. I don't remember which passage it was. Only that it was wild and bloody and strange. Apocalyptic stuff with sword bearing horsemen and bloody robes and probably a lamb wandering unexpectedly into the scene to take charge somehow. It was the kind of passage that turns sophisticated modern folk against Revelation, even if they find it perfectly acceptable to read Cormac McCarthy novels or watch Quentin Tarantino movies.

Anyway, the lector was reading away when I saw Roger's head kind of loll over and rest against the oak of one of those tall pew end caps, like a mesmerized child at story time. His posture was the opposite of an uncomfortable squirm. It was as if he was relishing it all without inhibition or embarrassment. As if such scenes were exactly what an Episcopalian might come to Morning Prayer in hopes of experiencing.

I had an appointment with Roger after chapel, so we walked out together and as we did, he turned to me and said, “What in the world were those people going through?” Meaning John of Patmos or the community that wrote down the book of Revelation in his name. What were they going through that made it necessary to tell a story in the wild and terrifying ways that they did?

That's it. That's the moment. It was just a question that's still hanging in the air, mostly unanswered, almost twenty years later. A question that's changed my posture toward Holy Scripture and also my posture toward other people when I'm at my best. It's really nothing more than a pause when we encounter something confusing or strange in the Bible or in a person. A pause that we can fill with a little curiosity and empathy if we try. So much can change in the short course of that curious pause.

We're not reading from Revelation today. For some of you it's worse than that. It's Saint Paul again. As a friend once put it when people were grumbling about someone I hadn't yet met, “It's popular not to like him.” Well, so it is with dear old Paul. And not for nothing. He's been used to put wives and gay people and plenty of others in their places by Christian preachers over the years.

But the first thing I love about our reading from 1st Corinthians is Chloe. It's not just that I've known some lovely humans who happened to be named Chloe, including one of the youth representatives to our vestry. Although she spells it differently ... but I digress.

But I'm not digressing. Or maybe the digression is the point. This is the only time this Chloe shows up in the Bible. But when Paul writes that “it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you,” it's precisely the fact that we haven't a clue who Chloe is that reminds us that we're reading a letter that was not written to us. It was written to

people who did know Chloe and who knew who her people were. So, it follows that our first question of the text should probably be, “What were those people going through?”

Well, we don’t know much, but we know a little about them. We know they were baptized, and we know that they weren’t getting along. I know. Shocking. Christians who weren’t getting along with each other. It’s harder for you to imagine than white robes washed clean with the blood of a lamb in Revelation, isn’t it. But Paul was addressing divisions within the early church. Factions that had emerged as people divided up into camps, it seems. So our first response to “What were those people going through?” is probably “Oh that. They’re dividing themselves up like humans always have.” It’s something that, in our day, we’ve raised to an art form and even invented whole industries and media dedicated to deepening our divisions and intensifying our resentments. We may not know the particulars, but we know the tendencies to divide ourselves from one another very well, don’t we?

We know some other things about them too, don’t we? They were baptized specifically into Christian community. Which is to say that they were immersed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which they believed was the event that somehow broke the power of sin and death that has been dividing humans from God and from each another and even from the earth itself since way back in Genesis 3. The first Christians believed that something else can order our life together and all of our relationships. And that new order that Jesus proclaimed and established broke down the age old divisions in our world. To use Paul’s words from Galatians 3, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

If that’s not a vision of the world we need desperately today, I don’t know what is. And it sounds like pure sweetness and light. But in practice, it’s really hard. It’s hard in real life with real people. The old divisions and categories the gospel does away with are what have been telling us who we are and how we fit together, not just for our whole lives, but for generations.

Could we really let go of identities that have been built on nationality, on economic status, on gender? Could we let go of the identity built on the family we were born into and the neighborhood we lived in and the church we attended or didn’t attend and the color of our skin? The identities we have built out of the schools we attended and the political parties we vote for and even the restaurants folks like us, whoever your “us” might be, tend to frequent.

What were these first Christians going through? Well, they were trying to live as a people who were no longer defined by the old categories and divisions in the world. And that, my friends, is really hard work.

In fact, I would argue that if you’re really going to form a community that resists the familiar divisions and definitions of people persistently, you’re going to need a Saint Paul or two in the mix. Someone to call us out when the old divisions open up again. Maybe even someone who gets specific. Who names names. Who draws boundaries and even says, “I’m sorry but you just can’t treat people in that way and be part of this community.”

This is the difficult irony isn’t it. To truly be a community that makes the redeeming love of God in Christ our organizing principle, we have to be vigilant and uncompromising about some things.

But it’s also true that an essential practice to keep a community true to the way of Jesus is the curious empathy that simply pauses before it passes judgment and asks, “What were those people going through?” That curious empathy really can help break us out of seeing the person across from us as a category instead of another child of God with a story all her own.

When Howard Thurman described how hatred takes root and grows in our hearts, he said it often begins when people have contact with each other, but no fellowship. And here's how he described what he meant by that.

"It is like the experience of going into a man's office and, in that moment before being seated, when the full gaze of the other is focused upon you, suddenly wondering whether the top button of your vest is in place, but not daring to look. In a penetrating, incisive, cold understanding there is no cushion to absorb limitations or to provide extenuating circumstances for protection."

We've all been there, haven't we? We've been looked at, or we've looked at another person without curiosity or empathy, with no interest in the extenuating circumstances and no cushion of forgiveness to absorb any of one's failures. All we are in such circumstances, is "that kind of person." Not a particular someone with a story and a history, but a category. And Thurman said that so many hates and horrors, even the violence and injustice that wracks our beloved Memphis and our world today, arise from this ordinary, categorical failure of fellowship between one human being and another.

The divisive issue at Corinth was baptism, of all things. Yesterday Ardelle told me of an insight from Dr. Beth-Sarah Wright. We promise at our baptisms to respect the dignity of every human being. *Respect*, Dr. Wright points out, literally means "to look again." It shares the same root as *spectacles* and *inspect*. Howard Thurman believed that how we look at each other can determine whether fellowship is increased, or divisions are opening up or widening between us. Maybe we need to look again.

I think he's right. And, in this, I think Paul has it right and I think Chloe's people were right to say, "It's happening again, people. We're dividing ourselves up according to all the wrong things. We have to look at each other again, because these divisions can turn into so much more than petty resentments."

But the opening into what might seem like an impossible fellowship between you and someone with a wildly different story than yours, really is within our reach. The reconciliation between one life and another made possible by the power of the cross ... as grand and noble as that sounds, I truly believe it can at least begin, in your life and in mine, through nothing more, but nothing less, than that simple, brave, curious empathy that withholds judgment just long enough to ask, "What must that person be going through?"

It is so simple. And it is so difficult. But might that curious empathy to look again, to respect, be something that's very much within your reach and mine today? Something we could actually commit to practicing together? Something that, if the way of Jesus is true, really can begin to heal what is still breaking into pieces this world that God so loves and so deeply desires to become one?