

'In the context this sermon was being given, those listening had been enslaved to addictions that had caused them to treat their families, those who loved them, badly. The pastor was saying that their guilt, their inability to forgive themselves, prevented them from seeing or accepting that God could love them, flawed as they were . . . Their guilt was separating them from God.

At first, I was confused why I connected so strongly with this sermon . . . Eventually, I realized that part of what has caused this sermon to stick in my mind was that I also have things that separate me from fully knowing, fully seeing God, as God is.

Today's scriptures tell the stories of two people who came to Jesus but left unable to find what they were hoping to find. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a group that believed they could more fully connect with God through obedience to the 613 laws in the Hebrew scriptures. In today's scripture from John, Nicodemus seemed to know in his heart that Jesus was of God and he so wanted to embrace the message. However, ironically Nicodemus' focus on obedience to God, blocked him from being able to fully know God through Jesus. And for that unfortunate "rich man" . . . he was trapped by his possessions . . . his possessions were separating him from God.

I am going to go out on a limb and suggest, that if each of us reflects on the question: What separates me from God? . . . from fully knowing and being deeply in relationship with God, that we each of us will find something.

For me . . . one of the things that separates me from fully knowing God is the fear of not being able to financially support my family. This fear is from an early life experience, one of my scars. While Jesus said that 'the lilies of the field never toil, and that birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but that God cares for them'. . . I have that fear from my past wired into me . . . and this has caused me to have difficulty fully trusting the promise Jesus is making.

These experiences in our lives, good or bad, have shaped us . . . we rationally know that these events shape how they see the world, but I think we may forget, as my movie pastor reminds us, that they also cause each of us to create our own, very individual, and more limited view of God . . . to in essence, create our own God.

I remember a poem my parents read to me when I was very young, titled "The Blind Man and The Elephant". In the poem, which is based on a parable that goes back at least 1500 years to Buddhist teachings, each blind man touches a different part of the elephant and draws a different conclusion about what he is touching. The poem ends with a clear moral, as did most of the stories and poems I remember from my childhood . . . the poem ends : So oft in theologic wars, The disputants, I ween, Rail

on in utter ignorance Of what each other mean, And prate about an Elephant Not one of them has seen!

We are of course those blind persons when it comes to our knowing God. We each see pieces of God incompletely, limited not by just our inability to physically see God, but by each of our histories, by that thing for each of us, often that hurt, that blocks our seeing, our knowing.

And while facing this limitation can be painful, I think there is also great hope . . . that hope comes from the personal healing and resulting broader vision . . . and the hope lies in how we chose to do church with each other.

We have in the UCC a great diversity of perspectives on God. These perspectives, if we take advantage of them, can be a great blessing. Just as with Nicodemus, the “rich man” and so many who struggle faithfully to know the truth, we have those things that prevent each of us from seeing parts of God. We can and should explore and work on those scars or experiences that are our obstacles. But in addition to that, we can also take advantage of what we have in our church community . . . your wound is not likely the same as my wound. . . so each of us has a different part of God blocked from our view. And so, if we can accept that we have a limited view, and share our view with each other, we can see that fuller picture of God.

The Apostle Paul suggested that in our lifetime, we would only see in a mirror, and dimly at that . . . I think Paul may have been saying that our understanding of God, the God that each of us sees, is limited by what and maybe who we see in each of our mirrors . . . And I while I agree with Paul, in my stubborn optimism, my greatest hope is that, despite our individual wounds, which can tend to keep us apart . . . that we can lovingly and openly share our diverse points of view to gain a fuller understanding . . . until that time when we do see face-to-face.

I would like to end with a prayer: “God, please help each of us to have the courage to explore the question “What separates me from knowing you? . . . from more fully seeing and being in close relationship with you. Please help us to feel your loving support on that journey, and please help us to use the strength and different points of view we have in our wonderful and diverse church community to know you more fully, and to do the work of Love in this world.

Amen

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