

“Are Eyes on the Prize Looking Too High?”
May 25, 2008

Matthew 6:24-34
Psalm 131

O Lord, my heart has not been haughty,
nor have my eyes looked too high,
nor have I striven for great things,
nor for things too wondrous for me.

What a strange psalm. What an odd idea. How could it be possible, to raise one’s eyes to look “too high” or to strive for things “too great” or “too marvelous”? What sort of killjoy psalmist or killjoy religion would embrace the notion that we should neither look for what is, as yet, invisible (because it’s “too high”) or ponder mysteries as yet incomprehensible (because they are “too great and marvelous”)?

Especially in an era of human history when we *can* see what was too high – too distant in the cosmos or too tiny in the molecular structure of all things – for our ancestors to see ...

In an era of human history when we *can* understand what was too great and marvelous – the birth of galaxies or the birth of an infant – for our ancestors to understand ...

In an era of human history when we need, more than ever, to raise our eyes high to see (and then embrace) the possibility of genuine reconciliation of all of God’s people of every tribe, every religion, every color, every nation ...

In an era of human history when we need, now more than ever, to occupy ourselves with the great and marvelous tasks of learning to cherish, protect, and restore this planet and to welcome human differences as gifts, instead of treating them as threats ... we hear a voice from the past who celebrates,

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In this era of human history – or in any other, for that matter – what possible word of God’s truth and blessing can this psalm be offering?

I was ready to answer, “Nothing that I can hear,” but then during the week something began to nag at the corners of my awareness. The memory of an experience I’d had as an attorney in Massachusetts grew stronger and stronger and began to haunt me. And I started to hear something in the first lines of this psalm that seemed as though it might indeed be offering a word of God.

This is the memory that started to haunt me. I was representing a young woman – I’ll call her “Mary Margaret” – who had been placed in an institution for individuals with developmental disabilities when she was in her early 20’s. I never did understand why the Department of Mental Retardation had placed her that particular facility. It wasn’t a

good fit. Almost all of the other residents were men at least 30 older than Mary Margaret, with strengths and challenges didn't match hers. Mary Margaret had enjoyed growing up in a busy suburb of Boston, so the rural setting of the institution and the fact that most of its vocational opportunities were related to the on-site dairy were not attractive features for her. To top it off, the institution was located at some distance from her family, and being unable to be involved in frequent family gatherings was deeply painful for Mary Margaret.

I was representing Mary Margaret in an administrative appeal, arguing that her placement didn't comply with state law and that a smaller residence closer to her family would benefit everyone concerned. As you might imagine, the administrative process was slow. We had to meet with officials at the institution, department officials, private contractors, and independent witnesses. I had good reason to believe that, at the end of this long process, Mary Margaret would be moving to a new home that suited her much better. But in the meantime ... in the meantime, we had to move forward, taking one little step at a time, and then waiting until we could take the next step.

Throughout the process, I would go to the institution to see Mary Margaret once every month or two. Sometimes I went because we had another administrative review, but more often I drove to see Mary Margaret simply to let her know that things still looked hopeful, even though the process was tediously slow.

When visited, we would occasionally go to lunch at the small town nearby. Over time, lunch in town became our habit every time I was there at mid-day.

The visit that I started to remember this past week was one of my mid-day visits. I arrived at the institution, learned where Mary Margaret was, and went to find her. We talked for a while about how things were going for her and what stage her administrative appeal was in. Then Mary Margaret excitedly asked if we were going to lunch. I told her no, that I didn't have much time and needed to get back to the office. The excitement and light immediately drained from her face. She was hurt; she was angry. And what I remember her asking me was simply, "Why can't you spend time with me?"

The truth was, I could spend time with her. An additional hour out of my day wasn't going to make or break my law practice. The trip to see her was 90 minutes each way, so, in fact, spending three hours on the road to see a client for only 20 minutes or so was downright wasteful.

I can't remember what bit of work back in the office seemed so pressing that day. It might have been related to Mary Margaret's case, but it's just as likely that it had nothing to do with her. Whatever it was, I was convinced that day that it was "real" lawyer work – an appeal, some bit of litigation maneuvering, preparation for a hearing. Whatever it was, I was convinced that it was more important than lunch with Mary Margaret.

O Lord, my heart *has* been haughty, and my eyes *have* looked too high. I was striving for great things in the practice of law, and I was failing to see and love and spend time with a beloved child of God, my client who was right in front of me – at eye level.

Grace intervened through Mary Margaret that day, and I stayed for lunch. Grace intervened, not only so Mary Margaret could have some French fries and some time away from the institution, but also so that I could receive the blessing of her company and the gifts of her humor and insight.

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When was the last time you thought the goal your eyes were fixed on and the wondrous things you were trying to do were more important than whatever was right in front of you? Was it this morning, when your child wanted your attention, but you wanted to read the latest news on the presidential campaign? Was it yesterday, when God was inviting you to slow down and behold the miracle of rain in late May, but you had loftier, greater things to do and behold? Or will it be tomorrow, when you're back at work and trying to complete a project, and you fail to see a co-worker whose shoulders are weighed down by worry or whose eyes are filling with tears? The psalmist may be offering you and me the invitation to see what is right in front of us and to consider no one as insufficiently great or wondrous to merit our attention.

But what about our God-given longing for the high and wondrous possibility of genuine justice for all God's people and all God's creatures? What about our efforts to be a part of the Spirit's work of reconciliation here and around the world? What about keeping our eyes on the prize as we seek to heal the wounds of slavery, exploitation, and violence that are as old as this country and as fresh as this morning?

If we keep our eyes on the prize of building God's beloved community, are we looking too high; have our hearts become haughty? Are we striving for things that are too great and wondrous? If we are seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus and to be filled with the Holy Spirit as we work toward true peace, have we set our sights too high? Could that possibly be the message of this psalm?

Well, I'd have to say ... it depends. If we keep our gaze so fixed on where we think we need to go ... if we keep our eyes and our hearts so focused on the goal we think is God's goal that we do not see or hear the people and the needs that are right in front of us, then, yes, we are in danger of losing our way. We are in danger of serving our own agenda and not God's. We are in danger of failing to see or hear God's call to move toward a more immediate goal or to take a different path to the same goal. We are in danger of thinking that the great and wondrous things we're striving for are so great and wondrous that it doesn't matter how we get there ... as long as we get there. And then, as Buddhist nun Pema Chodron and so many others have noted, we will become like a peace activist who's so convinced that he's right that he'll take his "Stop the War. End the Violence" protest sign and then use it to hit anyone who disagrees with him.

But if we keep our eyes on the prize of God's commonwealth for all, the prize of true Shalom ... if we understand it, not as a high, wondrous goal that we're striving for, no matter what, but as something that God is asking us to bring into the world with small, seemingly insignificant actions and attitudes each day, then we can rest like a weaned child on its mother.

And then we can also hear anew Jesus' words about not being able to serve both God and wealth. We can hear Jesus telling us that we cannot serve God by focusing only on the great, wondrous, and abstract vision of healing, justice, and peace if we're not willing to serve God in the nitty gritty, day to day living of our lives. We can't serve the God who cherishes Mary Margaret and serve our cherished egos at the same time.

My beloved brothers and sisters, let us keep our eyes open to all of God's creation, to lofty ideals and visions of peace and to the less lofty decisions and actions of our daily lives. Let us seek the ways of the Spirit in all that we do, even if we can't yet see how the Spirit is using our lives to move creation closer to Shalom. And let us build up one another in love as we keep our eyes on the prize of God's commonwealth and on the prize of being able to be here, in community with one another.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
May 25, 2008