

Seeing the Unseen

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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I hope that you remember something that someone said to you at some point in your life that changed your life. Or at least changed the way you look at life. I invite you to think about that now, and in a moment of silence, give thanks for that insight and for that person.

You probably have guessed that I'm going to tell you about wisdom that was imparted to me and the person who shared it with me. I'm the preacher today, so I get to do that. It was at the very beginning of my ministry as the Middle East Executive for our denomination and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I was traveling to the region for the first time in my new capacity, and meeting Middle Eastern church leaders for the first time. I like to describe my trajectory in that position in the following way: I began as someone who thought he knew a lot about the Middle East who happened to be a Christian; by the time I moved on to another role, twenty years later, and having been educated by the Christians of the Middle East, I had come to see myself as a Christian who happened to have learned something about the Middle East.

The words of wisdom that I'm recalling were uttered by a Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, a church that traces its origins to the missionary work of St. Mark, the Evangelist. Bishop Samuel was an ecumenist who led his church from its proud insularity into relationship with other churches in the region, and with the wider Christian

community around the world. I met him only once, and I doubt that he would have remembered our meeting much after it took place. I, on the other hand, have never forgotten it. Watch out what you say to someone. They may remember it, and it may make a difference in their life. During our conversation, Bishop Samuel mused that “You Christians in America have enjoyed the fruits of the Pentecost, while we Middle Eastern Christians are experiencing the blessing of the Cross.”

This was in 1980, when the decline of the mainline churches in the United States was on the horizon, but still seemed a relatively distant prospect. Our mission board’s headquarters were located in the Interchurch Center in New York City, a blocky building built on land donated by the oil baron John D. Rockefeller. Present in 1954 for the dedication of the Interchurch Center, facetiously named “the Godbox” by people in the neighborhood, was the then President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and on the Board of Directors of the building was Norman Vincent Peale, the prophet of positive thinking, and an original proponent of the gospel of prosperity. About Peale Adlai Stevenson once said, “I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling.” So our offices, along with those of other mainline denominations and of the National Council of Churches, were at the very center of things. We thought we were very important people.

No wonder that to a church leader in a distant country where at most 10% of the population identified themselves as Christian, where the church is marginalized and without political influence, no wonder that he saw us as enjoying the fruits of the Pentecost, while his people in both subtle and overt ways were living in the shadow of the cross. In a poignant illustration of his point, Bishop Samuel himself was killed two years later by a religious extremist while he stood on a reviewing stand in Cairo with Anwar Sadat when Sadat was assassinated. Bishop Samuel’s statement to me was not meant at all in a self-pitying way. He saw the cross not as something to be avoided, but to be embraced; for him the cross was not a decorative piece of jewelry, but a way of life.

Another Middle Eastern Christian leader, a mentor and dear friend, once said to me, in all sincerity, “It must be difficult to be a Christian in the United States of America.” He wasn’t being snarky or sarcastic. He meant it. At first, I almost laughed. Difficult? I wondered. Difficult in what way? Because a clerk at Walmart said, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas?” Which is about as bad as it gets for those who care about such things.

But what my friend meant was a kind of paradox, that the easier it is claim one’s Christianity, the harder it is really to be a follower of Jesus. Middle Eastern Christians never forget who they are, because who they are makes a difference in their status, and in their prospects in life. Christianity isn’t something they wear as a comfortable cultural identity, as we usually do; it is a choice that they make, over and over again, every day of their lives, because being a Christian by definition makes a difference in their lives. As it should for us.

So, Middle Eastern Christians resonate with the writings of Paul, yes, because of their theological depth, but also because they see Paul not as a distant historical figure but as one of them. I remember my first visit to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East (that’s his full and somewhat overly ambitious title) at the patriarchate in Damascus. He pointed out the window from his office. “See that street?” he asked. “That is the Street Called Straight. Paul walked on that street; to my mind, Paul still walks on that street.” Just to remind you, it was to a house on the Street Called Straight that Paul was taken after being blinded on the road to Damascus. In that house he didn’t just regain his sight; in that house he became a visionary.

One of the reasons that Paul is so consistently appealing to Middle Eastern Christians is that he knew what it meant to suffer. I don’t mean just that he suffered physical pain, although that he did. He was whipped and he was beaten with rods; he was shipwrecked and nearly drowned, and he suffered from an unidentified but apparently debilitating

“thorn in the flesh” that may have been epilepsy. So, yes, Paul knew what it meant to feel physical pain. But a more basic understanding of suffering is found in its original meaning of “to undergo,” which is to be robbed of one’s power, of the ability to be in control of one’s life.

Yes, illness or injury can cause us to experience pain, but the helplessness that you feel when you are ill, or when you are threatened with something you can’t do anything about, can be as bad, or worse, than actual physical discomfort. Suffering means to lose control. And nobody likes to lose control. Whether or not an addict can find a fix for their craving, every addict of whatever kind suffers, because addiction by definition is being under the control of some external force, whether it’s the compulsion to acquire things or to inhale, or consume, or inject things that can harm our bodies.

The worst thing that has ever happened to the Christian Church, the body of Christ, was when it got addicted to power, or rather when it entertained the illusion of having power, after it was embraced by its former foe, the Roman Empire. It was then that Jesus on a cross was replaced by Christ with a crown; when the suffering Jesus was replaced by a triumphant imperial Christ.

One of my most vivid memories from the Middle East is of a visit to the Turkish city of Iznik, ancient Nicaea. Nicaea is famous because it was where the Nicene Creed, one of the great creeds of the faith, was hammered out by a church council that met under the watchful eye of the Emperor Constantine, who had proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of his empire. Constantine had a palace by the lake in Nicaea. Today Nicaea’s successor Iznik is an entirely Muslim city. The ancient cathedral built there by the later Byzantine Emperor Justinian is now a pile of stones in the city square. I doubt that most Turks living there even know what those stones are or were, since, at least when I visited, the signs telling tourists about them were in English and, surprise, Korean. Justinian built his cathedral to last—the stones are massive—but even before the early

twentieth-century earthquake that scattered those stones around the city square, the cathedral hadn't been a church for many years because there were no Christians around to worship in it. When Byzantium, the new Rome, fell, so ultimately did the church that had so closely identified itself with it. Please keep this cautionary tale in mind when someone suggests that our country should be a "Christian country."

Oh, and today—just to suggest a modest parallel between the cathedral and the Interchurch Center—today, while there are still a few church offices in the Interchurch Center in New York City, the building is now mostly used by neighboring Columbia University for administrative offices. These edifices, an ancient cathedral and a modern office building, were built by human hands.

Now think back to the imagery used by Paul in today's reading from II Corinthians. It is imagery that reflects Paul's profession as a tent-maker. Paul knew about the fragility of tents, and while there is no record that he ever initiated a building project for any of the house churches he wrote his famous letters to, he probably would have recognized the transitory nature of buildings, too, no matter how massive, no matter how beautiful. "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

When Paul wrote this, I don't think he was looking wistfully toward the sweet bye and bye. The heavenly location of the eternal house from God was, in his eyes, both off in the future and right here, right now. It had to do not only with place, but with time; it partakes of eternity. It's what Jesus called the Realm of God, which is already here, but also not yet here.

I want to go back to that conversation with Bishop Samuel with which I began this sermon. While the Bishop knew that his people were a small minority in an Islamic context, I didn't realize until later that I was to become a part of a small minority in a

largely nominally Christian context. We, in this congregation and in this denomination, are part of a minority within a majority. We are no longer at the center of things, but rather on the margins. A church like ours is an irritating presence that continues to call our society and ourselves to account. We are, it seems, powerless. Paul suffered. He knew powerlessness, but he countered that reality of suffering with his assertion that “when I am weak, then I am strong.” And that is perhaps inspiring advice to us.

To repeat that touching sentence from today’s reading from II Corinthians, “We do not lose heart.” We do not lose heart. We look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what we can see is temporary, but what we can’t see is eternal. We have a building from God, a house not made with human hands. If only we look for it, dwell in it, and cherish its vision. It’s a blessing of the cross. Amen.