

Seeing With Our Hearts

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The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Ascension Sunday

May 16, 2010

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-19; Luke 24:44-53

Text: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit 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." -- Ephesians 1:17-18

Some of you have doubtless read Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind's book *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, the story of the way very smart people, some with the finest educations money can buy, thought about their energy company, Enron. The company, founded in 1985, claimed to have assets of over \$100 billion at one point and rose to become the seventh-largest corporation in America.

And as Enron became wealthier and more powerful – *Fortune* magazine called it "America's Most Innovative Company" for six consecutive years – it was able to attract what we commonly call the brightest and the best from places like Stanford and Harvard and Columbia and Northwestern and Princeton and Yale. And these very smart people, some with platinum-plated MBA's from the best business schools in the world, drove their company over a cliff. When the company began to experience difficulties, instead of doing the right thing – which is always the smart thing – they did the wrong thing. They tried to deny what was happening. They tried to deceive their stockholders, the government, and the public. They found ingenious ways to cook the books so that the danger wouldn't come to light and frighten away investors or damage the company's market value.

And the smartest guys in the room destroyed Enron. A massive company, employing more than 20,000 people, crashed and burned while the smartest guys in the room were at the helm. Enron became the symbol of what happens when you gut the laws designed to hold businesses accountable for their actions and let people who have their own financial self-interest uppermost in their mind control vast resources with virtually no independent oversight.

Enron was a perfect example of what my old boss, Harry Lewis, calls in one of his books, *Excellence Without a Soul*. Harry, the former dean of Harvard College, is referring to the increasingly amoral atmosphere that has become the reigning ethos at all our institutions of higher learning, public and private alike. Colleges and universities once saw themselves *in loco parentis*, that is, the guardians not only of the minds of the young men and women who were their charges, but their characters, as well. For most of their histories, places like Harvard and Yale understood their mandate not only to educate, but to shape young people for public service, historically in the church, in law, and in

medicine. Once upon a time, our colleges and universities understood that they were training our culture's leaders, and those institutions had daily morning prayers or chapel services to help them in that endeavor that students were required to attend; Harvard still continues the tradition of morning prayers, although they're no longer compulsory.

But in the profound cultural shift that occurred in the 1960s and 70s in our country and around the world, young people, quite rightly argued that if they were old enough to be drafted and killed in places like Vietnam, they were old enough to make their own decisions and should no longer be treated like children, and what began as a movement for individual freedom gradually morphed into the rampant amoral individualism that characterizes our civilization today. Places that were once responsible for the formation of whole people have become players in a kind of vicious social Darwinism, where the most aggressive and ruthless are rewarded and held up as role models, with no demand that their energies be directed toward anything other than their own personal advancement.

Thus Enron. And before Enron, the savings and loan debacle. And since Enron, the sub-prime mortgage mess. And the auto bail-outs. And a looming student-loan default crisis. And the scandal in the Catholic Church. And a war on terrorism that's now being waged in four countries and who knows where the next front will open.

And on and on. The people responsible for leading all these institutions are smart, make no mistake. Our business leaders are smart. Our military commanders are smart. Our politicians are smart. Bishops and cardinals are smart.

America is good at turning out smart people. Our colleges and universities attract and educate more smart people from around the world than any country on earth, and the number of applicants grows every year. Higher education is one of the growth industries in this country, and it shows no signs of slowing down soon.

But if Enron and the auto industry and now the banking industry and the scandal in the Catholic Church have any lessons to teach us, surely one of those lessons must be that smarts is not enough. For life on this planet to be what God created it and intends it to be, intelligence, no matter how brilliant, is simply not adequate. We cannot think our way out of every problem, because most of our most serious problems aren't problems of the head; they're problems of the heart. And it is not our minds that need to be enlightened, but rather our hearts.

And that's what Paul was praying for the Christians at Ephesus in the text for this morning's sermon. "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit 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."

Paul prays not that the Ephesian Christians may become smarter; they were probably already smart enough. They didn't need to learn more with their minds; they needed to feel more with their hearts, and not just any feeling, but the spirit of wisdom that comes from God and releases within us the power of God.

That's what it means to have the eyes of our hearts enlightened. It means opening the core of our being to the light of God, who is love and which is love. It means not necessarily being the smartest people in the room, but being the most enlightened people in the room – lit from within by the fire of divine love.

Someone has said that there is no substitute for wisdom; silence is the next best thing, and this is one of the important insights all the spiritual masters have tried to teach us. Silence is not emptiness, but rather it is the vessel we prepare in which to receive the voice of our still-speaking God. We have to create the silence necessary to have our hearts enlightened – enlightenment doesn't just happen. Even the Buddha had to sit in

meditation for many days, according to Buddhist tradition, for enlightenment to come to him.

Spiritual silence is relaxed and calm, but it is also attentive, alert, and expectant. It is also hopeful, that is, filled with hope. The silence we offer to God as part of our prayer is filled with the hope that we do not pray in vain. The hope that our prayers are answered in ways we neither expect nor always understand and often do not appreciate. The hope that we are shaped not only by the answers to our prayers but also by the prayers themselves.

“Silently now, I wait for Thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine.”

We sang that a few minutes ago in the sermon hymn but I'm afraid most of us go through life not in silent anticipation of discerning God's will, but rather, as Stanley Kubrick entitled his last film, with our eyes wide shut.

Oh, we have plenty of information – way too much, in fact – and we have plenty of knowledge, although it's a constant effort now to sort out knowledge from propaganda designed not to inform but rather to manipulate. And we have more and faster and cheaper ways to communicate with one another than people have ever had before.

But what are we communicating? What are we sharing with one another? What do we do when we make contact with one another?

Are we using our vast collective intelligence to help people secure sustainable food and clothing and shelter and energy, or are we using the Internet to show people how to build bombs?

Are we using our cell phones to strengthen the security net for ourselves and others, are we using them to arrange drug deals and send pornographic images?

Are we using the crisis of a faltering economic system to examine our priorities and practices toward making them more humane and just, or are we already hard at work trying to build in loopholes and undermining any real change to benefit the economically, politically, and socially left-behind?

Enlightened minds are of little use when it comes to God's realm without enlightened hearts. How sad it is, Helen Keller is supposed to have said, when people have sight but lack vision. Human intelligence can be taken captive by demonic powers. We saw it in two world wars, we saw it in Stalin's purges, we saw it in the killing fields of Cambodia, we saw it in the genocide in Rwanda, we saw it in the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Bosnia, and we're seeing it now in Iran's determination to become a nuclear power. Human intelligence can be put in the service of violence and destruction just as easily as it can be used to create and heal, and the determining factor is not the well-trained mind, but the enlightened heart – enlightened with the radiance of a love that comes from beyond us and that draws us from ourselves to itself – to God.

What in your own life are you not seeing because you're looking with the wrong eyes? What child are you overlooking in their extraordinary ordinariness because you're bedazzled by the brilliance or cleverness of one of their peers?

What opportunity for healing or reconciliation are you missing because you're still looking at things through the lens of old hurts and painful memories?

What suffering are you continuing to inflict on those who labor to produce our goods and services because the only line that matters is the bottom line of cost or convenience?

It is said that as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the greatest minds of his age, lay dying, he repeatedly called out, “More light! More light!” and the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno, reading this story many years later in one of Goethe's biographies, is said to have closed the book and said to his wife, “Goethe was mistaken. Instead of

crying for light, light, more light, what he should have asked for was warmth, warmth, more warmth, for human being do not die of the darkness; they die of the cold.”

The world, my friends, has plenty of light, what it lacks is warmth. It lacks the warming touch not of brilliant minds, but of generous hearts. Hearts made generous because their eyes have been opened to the abundance of God's love that surrounds us, supports us, and supplies us with everything we need and more.

Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to become masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts and set them on fire for Christ's sake. Amen.