

Logs In Our Eyes

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After years of seminary training and personal study I want to tell you something about Jesus: He was a brainy guy. He was lead by his head as much as he was by his heart; he used reason as much as emotion. Indeed, a case could be made that it was through the power of thought that he tried to make the message of God known and to change the lives of others.

The authors of the New Testaments were never really interested in the “personality” of an individual, but the Gospel writers could not resist conveying a particular trait about Jesus, namely that his mind was remarkable. And so they tell us about the time when Jesus was in the temple teaching the elders - at age 12. That would be about 7th grade by our calendar. We also hear that as time went on he “grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” It seems Jesus became even more perceptive as he developed, and was honored for it by people calling him “rabbi,” teacher, even though he had no formal religious education. In the brief final years of his ministry, we hear how the piercing clarity of his thoughts was so threatening to some people, ministers and laity alike, that on several occasions they wanted to kill him---and finally did.

Jesus wanted his followers to use their head, too. He wanted them to be wise. And so in a variety of ways he tried to help them recognize and overcome the distorted ways in which they often thought. He called these distorted ways of thinking, “logs in your eyes.” We heard that image of “log” in our scripture reading this morning (Matthew 7:1-5). Jesus taught us that before we get on our critical high horse and start pointing out the faults of others we’d better first recognize the limitations, biases, and outright errors in our own thinking at times. Before we start proclaiming that our way of thinking is right and that different ways of thinking are wrong, we’d better start looking for the distorting logs in our own eyes---because they’re there, even if we can’t see them.

One of the logs Jesus tried to make his followers aware of, that we’ll focus on this morning, was what we can call the “either-or” log. It is super-abundant in human thinking and all of us are prone to think this way at times. Here things are taken as either one way or the other. Either something is the case or it is not the case. Now this seems logical in a sense, doesn’t it? Something is a triangle or it is not a triangle. This is the official season of summer or it is not the official season of

summer. But when it comes to human life, either-or doesn't work. In fact, it can become a distorted way of thinking that is harmful to others and to our self.

Remember that time when a gossipy crowd gathered around Jesus as he was trying to minister to a disabled man? Right in front of this crippled person, perhaps right in front of his mother and father, the crowd asks this blunt question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" In essence they were saying, "Either this man sinned and caused his own miserable condition or it was the fault of his sinning parents. One way or the other. So tell us who it was, Jesus, so we can know who to blame." But Jesus, somewhat frustrated it seems, cuts through this distorted way of think, this log in their eye, and says basically, "Neither one is responsible. Neither one is to blame. Stop thinking so narrowly, so harmfully. Think, instead, about how God can work through situations like this for good." In many ways Jesus tried to tell us that life is so rich and complex and filled with the working of the spirit that we can't cut it up into either-or, one way or the other, categories. Life doesn't work that way.

I heard my first either-or distortion when I was growing up in my hometown of Arthur, Illinois. It was "You can't be Baptist and dance." You're either a Baptist and don't dance or you dance and are therefore not a Baptist. Remember that? No middle ground. No room for other people's thoughts or feelings. If you dance you are "out," you are not a part of our group, not a part of our religious community, and if you say that you're still a Baptist and follow every other Baptist belief except for the dancing restriction, we say to you, "You may claim you are a Baptist but you are no TRUE Baptist and God knows it." Either-Or.

That's similar to a bumper sticker I saw recently that boldly proclaimed: "You can't be Catholic and be pro-abortion." Either you're a Catholic and against abortion or you're not a Catholic at all. One way or the other. You're either in or out.

All this might sound rather formal and legalistic, having to do with definitions, but it can generate a great deal of hurt and anger. I've known that personally.

There was a time when I was visiting at the bedside of friend who was dying. My friend was in a coma and I was talking to an out-of-town family member who had heard that I would probably be leading the upcoming funeral. Suddenly the family member asked me, "Have you been saved? Have you had a conversion experience with Jesus, where you were convicted of your sins and turned your life over to Christ?" I was caught off guard, and quietly explained that, no, I had not had that kind of experience, but that I certainly honored that experience for those who had.

I should have stopped there, but I went on to say that I had been raised in a Christian home by a mother and father who believed in and loved God, that I had gone to church all my life, and that I had come rather naturally to feel close to Jesus and to follow him. “That doesn’t count,” the family member blurted back. “Unless you’ve had a personal saving experience with Jesus, you can’t call yourself a Christian and you particularly can’t call yourself a Christian pastor. Perhaps you’re not the person who should do this funeral.”

I must confess to you that at that moment, beside my dying friend, holy thoughts got blasted away by hot emotions. My temper flared inside and I had to struggle to keep it in check. An important part of my family life, personal experience, and career identity were discounted by a rigid way of thinking that divided life into “our way” and “your way,” with only one way being right, and it certainly wasn’t mine.

Let me briefly lift up some other devastating either-or logs. After the terrorist attack of 9/11, President George W. Bush announced his planned military response. He said to all the countries of the world and to all their leaders and to all their people, “Either you’re with us or you’re against us.” What that meant was that either you agree with us and what we are going to do, and cooperate with us, or else you’re the enemy, too, and we’ll have to remember that in the years ahead. His statement wasn’t an appeal to reason or to the heart. It was an ultimatum. Either you’re with us or against us. Unfortunately it ignited international outrage precisely when we needed friends.

These devastating either-or logs occur in families, too. You’ve heard the one that says, “Either you do things my way while you’re under my roof or you’re out of here. It’s my way or the highway.”

Sometimes the either-or log is more pleading but still powerfully irrational: for example, “You can’t love me and still drink.” “Either you love me and will stop drinking or you keep drinking and thus show me you don’t love me. One way or the other.” We understand the person’s frustration, here, of course, but the person is failing to realize that the cure for this problem most likely has nothing to do with the strength of the drinker’s love. But people often make such either-or love statements that typically do more harm than good.

Avoiding the either-or log in our thinking doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t have an opinion or shouldn’t take a stand on things. Taking a position is alright and important. But what becomes harmful is when we rigidly divide an issue, or belief, or decision into this way or that way, and declare that’s all the reality there is, and that our way is the only right way.

This is the first Sunday after Rev. Vertigan has left to become a conference minister. We wish him well. I met a person a few weeks ago, not from this congregation, who knew that John was leaving and she said, "Well, I suppose St. Peter's must be in turmoil." "No," I replied to her, "fortunately we are not. Rev. Vertigan was a wonderful pastor for us while he was here, and the church is in fine shape spiritually and financially." While this woman was an intelligent person, her reaction was an implicit either-or way of thinking: either a well-functioning senior minister is in place and you're OK or a well-functioning senior minister is not in place you're not OK. One way or the other. But that's not the way it is. We have not been in turmoil since John announced that he was leaving. We might be sad, we might be puzzled, we might not look forward to the hard work ahead, but we have not been in turmoil. We here at St. Peter's are in transition between senior ministers but we are not in turmoil.

Now here's my plea for all of us: Let's not allow this transition between senior pastors to become one of turmoil. Let's keep our head on straight, let's stay sensible and not let ourselves slip into either-or thinking about what John's leaving means about us as a church, or about what John's leaving means about John as a person. Let's not start formulating either-or thoughts about how the search process should go, or about what we will do if things don't go the way we want them to.

Whenever we resist narrow either-or thinking, we are following the lead of Jesus who brought freedom to people by liberating them from their distorted reasoning. And so I say to you this morning, "Log off and log out."

Amen.