

The Value of View

Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I kneel before the father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, 21 to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! AMEN.

Have you ever heard of a thing called “view taxes”? Well, these days, many homeowners across scenic New Hampshire are paying through the nose for what they can see with their eyes, and it is forcing some off the land beneath their feet.

This is happening because officials in New Hampshire towns have decided that all those majestic panoramas for which the state is famous are not priceless after all. Instead, officials now consider spectacular views as bonus features of houses, akin to a finished basement or an attached garage, and tax assessors are putting dollar amounts on them. This, in turn, requires homeowners with a glorious view to feed the community coffers a gluttonous property tax — stiff enough that some are selling out and moving away.

Bennet Nicholson, for example, lived in Winchester, New Hampshire, where his house overlooked a valley through which the Connecticut River flows. In 2002, his house and land were appraised at about \$98,000. In 2003, after the tax assessor calculated a value for the vista, Nicholson's domicile was deemed to be worth \$273,000, and his property taxes more than doubled. Nicholson had planned to spend the rest of his life in that house, but when the property taxes more than doubled, he put his place on the market for double what he paid for it, and relocated to Canada.

New Hampshire is not the only state now taxing landowners for the grandeur beyond their gates — the practice is taking root elsewhere — but it's really being pushed in the Granite State because of an influx of people seeking homes with impressive views, and because the state has neither a sales tax nor a levy on personal income. So property tax has become a primary revenue source for

government operations.

Naturally, property owners are fighting back, and some communities are being taken to court, with the result that a few assessments have been reduced, but overall, the principle is holding. Heavenly beauty outside your home means hefty bills inside your mailbox. The tax man is not backing down.

One New Hampshire retiree complained about the “view tax” when his assessed valuation doubled, arguing he doesn’t own the view, can’t control it, and it’s increasingly obscured by pollution. Besides, he is legally blind! The assessor guy was unamused and unmoved.

The irony is that from a homeowner’s perspective, the more valuable view is the one from which little inspiration and/or uplift can be drawn. If your house overlooks a slag heap, a junk yard or barren, prosaic landscape, it’s going to save you money. So the real view value is determined by who is looking and by what that person is seeking from what there is to see. It is, as they say, in the eye of the beholder.

Still, without the incentive of keeping one’s property tax low, it is hardly imaginable that anyone would deliberately choose to homestead next to a landfill. Yet, when we move beyond the realm of actual real estate, that is exactly what God’s people have done time and again. *They have occupied distinctly unpromising terrain because they have a bigger view of things.* A couple of times in recent sermons I have mentioned that things can look or appear very different depending on one’s perspective. Let me illustrate with a short story:

There was a dispute which had grown into a lawsuit between two farmers as to just where the property line between them was and where a fence should be. Finally, one of the farmers sold out, and the purchaser moved in. Soon the purchaser met Farmer Smith, who was agitated and said to his new neighbor, “They tell me you have bought this farm, and I just want to inform you that as part of your purchase, you have bought a lawsuit.”

Farmer Smith was asked to explain, and said, “Well, the fence, being located where it is, cheats me out of two feet of my land.”

“Then,” said the newcomer kindly, “we will just move it back four feet.”

“No,” said Farmer Smith, “that is more than I ask.”

“But,” said the new neighbor, “I would rather have peace with my neighbors than a few feet of earth!”

“Then,” said Farmer Smith very quietly, “if that is the way you feel, the fence stays just where it is and the lawsuit is all off.” You see how perspective and who you are dealing with can change everything?

Consider how Paul invested himself in barren land. If we read Paul’s words in Ephesians 3 out of context, it is easy to assume that he is residing in some pretty fancy digs. “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,” Paul writes. He

goes on to say that he prays “according to the riches of [God’s] glory.” He speaks of knowing the “fullness” of God and then concludes with a line of benediction: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly ... and so on.” Such words and phrases as “riches,” “glory,” “fullness” and “accomplish abundantly” hardly leave us thinking he is talking from a grim, disheartening circumstance, but *actually... that was the case*. Paul writes the letter to the Ephesians while he is in prison. And in the verse right before our reading, he mentions his *sufferings*. Verse 13 “I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. [NOTE 1]

So okay, he is in prison and he is suffering, but with his very next paragraph he begins these powerful words of praise for and confidence in God. How can he do that? It’s because from his prison window, he’s got a “great view”. With the eyes of faith, he can see glory emanating from God and he catches a vision of the “humanscape” as God wants it to be, a realm in which God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” It is hard for me to get my head around that. To start thinking of my circumstances, our community, as a place where God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we *can* ask or imagine.”

[NOTE 2] In the centuries since, Christians have done the same thing time after time. They have come upon repulsive and heart-sickening situations, *but instead of running away, they have set up camp and stayed to help*. Think of William Booth ministering to the dirt-poor of England, Albert Schweitzer doctoring the disease-ridden poor of Africa and Mother Teresa caring for the dying poor of India. Think of the number of charities, helping organizations, 12-step groups, hospitals and ministries that began because somebody looked at bleakness (at the landfills of circumstances) but saw the opportunity for blessing, opportunities for God to work.

On a more personal scale, this same sort of thing happens every day. People take troubled kids into their homes, volunteer to hospice, help out at soup kitchens, answer hotlines for people in crises, and do the thousands of other thankless tasks that help struggling brothers and sisters make it through another day. One of the kids from my the youth group that I led at my first church, has adopted four kids who come from terrible circumstances. When, like Paul, we catch the vision of the kingdom, we can invest ourselves in the most unpromising circumstances, have little that is tangible to show for our efforts but still see God’s grace from our vantage point. Then we can declare, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father” There are so many circumstances, so many instances, so many ways that God does amazing things in the lives of people that it causes me to fall to my knees and just praise God, from whom all blessings flow. [NOTE 3]

In a sense, following Jesus calls for a kind of double vision, so that when we look out of our spiritual window, we see two things: the faraway and the near-at-hand. Ralph Waldo Emerson gives us a way to understand this. One day in 1836,

after walking the land around his Massachusetts town, Emerson returned home and wrote: *The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some 20 or 30 farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet it is to this their warranty-deeds give no title.* How do you put a price on the beauty of God's creation?

While the 21st-century tax assessor is trying to put a value on part of what Emerson wrote, Emerson was talking about having the vision of a poet who can look at the faraway sweep of what's before him and see not a plan for subdividing the landscape so as to sell it in chunks, but the panoramic glory of the whole view. That's one kind of vision, akin to the spiritual farsightedness that enables us to "see" the coming kingdom and trust its reality. When every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is King. It was that sort of vision Paul had when he declared, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" [NOTE 4]

But Emerson alludes to the other kind of vision, too — the near-at-hand. He mentions property owned by three of his neighbors, Miller, Locke and Manning. Their lands, along with those of others, made up the larger landscape about which Emerson waxed poetic. But of necessity, Miller, Locke and Manning's view of the landscape had to be more narrowly defined. That was New England, known for its rocky soil, so Miller, Locke and Manning were the ones who had to dig the boulders out of the ground. They were the ones who had to plant the fields, mend the fences, tend the livestock, maintain the buildings, reap the harvest and foot the bill. Their view was the nearsightedness that feeds the hungry at hand and deals with the fundamentals of daily existence. It was the sort of vision Paul had when later in Ephesians, after his rhapsodic burst about the big picture, he talked to his readers about the daily nitty-gritty of following Jesus: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy" (4:28).

Opportunities to do good abound, but often don't look much like opportunities. Usually they look more like overwhelming needs or uncontrollable problems. It is often hard to see much promise in them. What they have in common is that they don't much match the way the kingdom of God is described in the Bible — as a place where death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more, and where God himself will wipe every tear away.

That kingdom isn't here yet in any complete way, so in the meantime, we, with God's help, can move into the unwelcoming terrain and try to wipe the tears of those living there. We may not much succeed, but there is holiness in the trying. If we want to have an impact on our community, on our neighbors, we must find

out what their needs are and serve them! [NOTE 5]

There's a story, probably apocryphal, about Igor Stravinsky that illustrates this point. He was considered by many the greatest and most versatile composer of the 20th century, but he was also known for writing extremely difficult passages into his works. One time he created a violin interlude so formidable that a master violinist declared to Stravinsky that it was impossible to play.

"Of course," Stravinsky replied. "I don't want the sound of someone playing the passage perfectly, I want the sound of someone **trying** to play it."

In places of great need, indeed in life itself, that is the definition of faithfulness to God's call. We are not asked to be successful or effective, but we are asked to try. As Jesus followers we are called to serve, to love, to share ...and leave the results to God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And when we do try, because of what we can see from those miserable locations with our spiritual sight, we can declare, "What a view!" and "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father" Let's pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for "The Value of View" based on Ephesians 3: 14-21

Given at Doster Community Church October 2, 2022

- I. With such words as "riches," "glory," "fullness," and "abundantly" you would think he is writing while staring at a mountain view. But the reality is that Paul was writing from prison!
- II. With God's perspective of love, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with the eyes of faith, he can see the glory emanating from God and remember that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine.
- III. Sometimes we need to see with God's eyes and fall down on our knees and just praise God from whom all blessings flow. See that one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is King.
- IV. But we also need to have the type of vision that sees the needs of our neighbor across the street or just down the road. We must look for ways to serve our neighbors.
- V. We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful to try our best to love, serve, and share ... and leave the results to God. What are you going to do about it? Write down something you will do this week to live it out!