

## Changing Perspectives

July 13, 2008

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*If you change the way you think about things,  
the things you think about will change.*

**Welcome** this morning to our worship service! Whoever you are, wherever you are on your life's journey, on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here! In case you wondered, "It's definitely not like this every Sunday." Today we begin our summer worship theme, "Changing Perspectives." Instead of just talking about what that means, I thought it would be good to actually experience a change in perspective – and so here we are, facing the foyer and the fountain, looking at the Sanctuary, and our place in it, in a whole new way.

The two banners you see hanging on the sides were created by UCG member Martha McInnes as part of our church retreat this year. The theme of the Retreat was common threads. Each person at Retreat brought a piece of ribbon, string or cord; they all were woven together to make the colorful panels of our common threads. We also, as a retreat community, intentionally did two spiritual practices. The first was paying attention – the words you see on these side banners – paying attention to the moment, to the person in front of us, to what was happening within and around us.

And that is what I call you to do now, and during the next hour, as we experience and reflect on Changing Perspectives. Pay attention – to what you are thinking and feeling: surprise, annoyance, curiosity, frustration, questioning, impatience or a sense of fun. Pay attention to what you observe from this different perspective. What do you see that you've never noticed much before in this Sanctuary? What do you notice worshipping from a different place in this congregation?

Our second spiritual practice was to silently bless ten things or ten people each day of retreat. And we learned that paying attention is the prelude to blessing. So see if you can identify a blessing that arises for you from this worship service, in the midst of this change in your perspective.

### **Scripture – Luke 17: 11 to 19**

And when Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, he happened to pass between Samaria and Galilee. As he was coming into a village, he was met by ten lepers who kept their distance. They shouted, "Jesus, Teacher, have mercy on us!"

When Jesus saw them, he said to them, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As the lepers departed, they happened to be made clean. Then, one of the lepers, realizing that he had been healed, came back. He praised God out loud, sank to his knees at Jesus' feet and thanked him. This man was a Samaritan.

Jesus said, "Weren't there ten who were cured? What became of the other nine? Didn't any of them return to praise God besides this foreigner?" And then Jesus said, "Get up and be on your way; your trust has cured you."

**Sermon** - This is a Bible story I remember hearing as a child. And I remember talking about it in my Sunday school class at St. Luke Lutheran Church when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The reason I remember how old I was is that the junior high Sunday school

classes were separated by gender: there was a girls' class and a boys' class. So I have an image of my first year in junior high, sitting around a wooden Sunday school table with the other 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls talking about this Bible story. We all agreed about what the story meant. We were all annoyed with those ungrateful nine lepers in this story who walked away from Jesus without so much as a thank you after he had healed them. And, oh, how much self-righteous pleasure we took in chastising those ungrateful lepers. We knew the point of this story was not to be like them.

As I was thinking about our worship theme, changing perspectives, I realized there was another way to understand this Bible story. What if I changed the way I thought about it and instead of grumbling about the nine lepers who didn't say thank you, what if I focused on the one leper who did? What made it possible for this one man, a Samaritan at that, to turn back and to express his gratitude to Jesus? Why was the story told this way?

So I did a little Biblical research. This story appears only in the Gospel of Luke, a Gospel that was probably written around 85 to 90 CE, some 60 years after Jesus died. The author of Luke was probably a well-educated Gentile (*which means he wasn't Jewish*) who had good access to the Hebrew Bible. However, scholars surmise that this author was not familiar, on a first-hand basis, with Palestine, since the geographic information in the story is not plausible. If you look at a map of ancient Palestine, it is very unlikely that someone would pass between Galilee and Samaria to reach Jerusalem. But it was important to the author to include Samaria in the story, so that the grateful leper would be a Samaritan. And why was that important? What do we know about relationships between Jews and Samaritans during Jesus' time?

Samaritans were the other, the outcasts, the foreigners. Jews and Samaritans were enemies from ages past, divided by a political split that set up a rivalry in Israel between the cities of Jerusalem and Samaria. Each city had its own branch of religion and its sphere of influence; each of its peoples felt compelled to outdo the other. The distrust, the disputes, the racial hatred between Jews and Samaritans was pervasive.

Knowing that lets me think about this story from a different perspective. The leper who returned to give thanks was the person least expected to be sensitive and caring, the very person whose faith, and whose life, was scorned by the religious establishment at the time. Seeing the story from this viewpoint opens up new learnings. It calls me to think about whether I recognize gratitude when it comes to me, as it often does, in unanticipated ways from people I don't imagine will be appreciative. The story asks me who I dismiss, who I mentally write-off by virtue of my own preconceived notions. And how often do I, like my 7<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday school class, focus on the thoughtless people and the negative moments of my day, and thus overlook the wonderful people and positive moments of grace that also happen every day of my life?

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Perspective is the way we view a situation or a topic or a person. In art, it is the way things appear given their distance from us. Faith is our personal perspective on the way we view the world and our lives and what the possibilities of the sacred and holy are. What is forgiveness but a change in our own perspective? This summer we're focusing on the changing perspectives of life throughout our world today as well as the moments when our own perspective is changed because of an experience we have.

I traveled to Europe for the first time when I was 25 years old. I'd never been on an airplane before. My understanding of life and people and cultures was extremely narrow. That trip changed the way I thought about everything. Here were people in all these other countries, going about their lives in both similar and different ways, speaking other languages, raising their children, singing and laughing, with all sorts of governments and social services. It was mind-blowing for me. On the evening of July 21, 1969, Larry and I were walking by a department store in Munich, Germany. There was a crowd gathered around a television in that department store window watching a German news broadcast. Larry began translating the German into English for me. Suddenly, we all saw Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, and the broadcast switched live to Armstrong, speaking in English. So Larry translated – *"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind"* - into German for the folks standing with us. Watching a human being walk on the moon, seeing our planet Earth in the moon's background, and experiencing all of this in a German city, surrounded by German people, was an astonishing switch of perspectives for me. Like learning to celebrate Christmas in Florida, like having my son join the military, experiences that change the way I think about things and also change the things I think about.

Lisa Schiavoni and Bobbi Knickerbocker are both members of our Board of Parish Ministry, the committee that sets our summer theme and that coordinates worship when Larry and I are on vacation. I've asked Lisa and Bobbi to each share briefly an experience that has changed the way they think about something.

Lisa Schiavoni -

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Bobbi Knickerbocker – "Several years ago I worked as a Pediatric Hospice nurse in Orlando. I had a patient by the name of Mel. Mel lived with his mother, Sabrina, and two other siblings. The first few times I visited Sabrina and Mel, I was shocked by the level of poverty they lived in. I could make a list of what they didn't have, but perhaps the best way to tell you is that the only consistent thing they did have were hoards of roaches. Their poverty and the roaches did consume for my first several visits.

I gradually began to pay attention and seeing a 28 year old mother dying of AIDS, caring for her two year old son dying of AIDS, increased by awareness and sensitivity to what was unfolding before me. I visited Sabrina and Mel once to twice each week for almost two years. The relationship we developed changed just about every perspective and fiber of my being. So on the night Sabrina died it was a privilege for me to sit vigil with Sabrina's mother and sister as she took her final breath.

On the drive home in the early morning hours, I wasn't thinking of roaches. The roaches and I came to some agreement; I'm not sure what that agreement was, but there seemed to be one. My thoughts that morning went to the many gifts and blessings I received from Sabrina and Mel's lives, with great awareness I would not have known them if not for their deaths. I also thought about relationships, especially the relationships I witnessed between Sabrina and Mel and their family. I knew I had a great deal of work to do with my relationships. I thought about poverty and how no one should ever have to live or exist in the poverty Sabrina and Mel existed in. But I

also reflected on the many faces of poverty, and I knew I lived in a spiritual poverty. Finally I thought about the amazing faith demonstrated by Mel, even though he was only two, three and four years old, and by his extended family. I watched as Sabrina's mother and sisters bathed and clothed her body, told stories and prayed for her and her children. This faith was deep and intense and surpassed any boundary of religion. It was my relationship with Sabrina and Mel that taught me the meaning of the statement, *When I change the way I think about things, the things I think about change.* And so do I."

Thank you Lisa – thank you Bobbi.

It's good to talk about changing perspective – and it's also good to experience a new perspective and how we react to it, which is why I turned us all around here in the Sanctuary this morning. And I trust that you have paid attention during the past hour not only to what you've been thinking and feeling, but also to what you've noticed from this different perspective on the Sanctuary and on worship, what you've seen that you normally don't see.

Remember this experience as you go through the week ahead. Check out your reactions to a change of perspective that comes your way. Where are you overly reactive to something new or different? What is the fear that underlies your degree of reaction? Can you find another perspective on a situation or a person that you are struggling with or trying to help?

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, reminds us that one of the keys in changing our perspective is to connect with our heart. Compassion and loving-kindness allow us to see ourselves, to see others, to see situations in ways that change our perspective. Luke tells the story of the grateful Samaritan leper so that his audience, and we, can see this person from a different perspective. When I see my waitress at Applebees or the check-out clerk at Publix or the intake person at the doctor's office with a compassionate heart, my perspective changes, and I am more patient and kind. When my friend does something thoughtless, I have a choice of perspective: anger at what she did or compassion, knowing that something must be going on with her that is making her life difficult or stressed. I have a choice about my perspective: whether I use the mirror of anger and fear or whether I use the mirror of compassion and openness.

So say it along with me this one last time: When I change the way I think about things, the things I think about change.

First Corinthians 13 is one of the most beautiful chapters of the Bible with its poetry about love. Yet we often skip over the middle part of Chapter 13 which is about the way our perspective can change during our lives. Listen to those words:

*Our gifts of knowledge and inspired messages are always partial; but when what is whole and complete comes, then what is partial will disappear. When I was a child, my speech, my feelings, my thinking were all those of a child. Now that I am older, I can see beyond those childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; what I shall know in eternity will be complete – as complete as God's knowledge of me.*

*But – (translates Eugene Peterson)- for right now, until that completeness comes, we have three things to do that can lead us to more clarity: trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, and love extravagantly.*

I believe that faith and love move us to see differently, move us from seeing dimly to seeing more clearly. And prayer is a powerful tool in changing our perspective. I can't explain all the mysteries of prayer, but I do know that praying for someone always changes the way I think about them. When I hold someone in the light of prayer, it also creates an opening for light in my heart. And in the process, something always changes, especially within me, and then that change ripples out in untold numerous ways to others and to the world.

So in the spirit of changing perspectives, let us join in prayer.

First, pray for yourself, for what you learned or relearned in the experience of this worship service, and for what you want to take with you today. Second, pray for a tough situation or question that you are dealing with in your life. Pray for yourself as you would pray for a friend and ask to see the issue you are dealing with through different eyes, through a different perspective.

Third, pray for someone in your life whom you might see in a different way. Simply picture this person and hold them in light – no solutions, no suggestions – just light all around them.

And then pray for gratitude to fill your heart and flow through your life. What are you most grateful for right now? Who are you most grateful for? Surround that person with light and blessing.

Remember this moment, sitting in a different place, seeing a different view, praying from a place you don't ordinarily pray from, and carry those practices with you into the week ahead, paying attention, blessing, and sharing a compassionate heart.

