

“A Bird’s Eye View” / Deuteronomy 34:1-12 / 22 September 2013

I’m envious of the rare and precious gift that Moses received on his deathbed: a bird’s eye view, a vast, panoramic, sweeping vista of the long awaited Promised Land. At long last, just before dying, Moses sees the fruit of all his life’s hard labors, sees it then dies. And I thought as I read this ancient story, “Wouldn’t it be a marvelous gift to see our life in perspective just for once, to look upon all the fruit of our life’s labors, to see its events and experiences laid out before us from beginning to end, like a road map or a tapestry, see it all in perfect perspective, then perhaps even die...satisfied?”

In my experience, however, that’s not how it works. Let me tell you a little bit about that, and in this sad tale about my own misunderstandings, perhaps you’ll get a few glimpses of yours. In seminary there was a professor from overseas, a proper and regal sort of fellow with a stately accent and a piercing gaze. He was a solemn, unsmiling man who took things all very seriously...as if theology were a science rather than an art. Most Presbyterian seminaries their token European on the faculty, usually a German or a Scotsman. Sometimes a Dutchman or Englishman. It gives a school an extra measure of respectability if someone actually crossed an ocean to work there. It’s also nice to have a faculty member wandering around campus saying things like “shed-you’ll” instead of “schedule.” Whenever there’s an important public event at the seminary, like when officials from the denomination come for a visit, or a world-famous scholar, they bring out the token European, in all his grand Old World churchly regalia, so he can lead everyone in the opening prayers and closing benedictions with his impressive accent. Well, that was the function this particular professor served; he was the public face of the institution, and he also gave lectures. Well, I always believed this professor disliked me. But for some reason he was quite fond of my then-girlfriend-Michelle. Of course, Michelle was one of his students, too, and she claims that she could have copied names out of a phone book, turned it in for a grade, and he would have given her an “A.” I think it’s true. This professor really liked Michelle. In fact, he liked most people, except me. Other students thought he was the greatest, funniest, kindest man on faculty.

Well, from earliest childhood, I was always a little nervous around my teachers, so I never warmed up to this one. I took his classes and got decent grades. We passed each other in the halls, nodded at each other without speaking. All in all, we had what I thought to be a normal teacher-student relationship. Later on, Michelle announced to the professor that she and I were getting married. And the old professor was crestfallen. “What?” he asked. “You’re marrying that guy who always frowns at me? I don’t know why he hates me so.” And he asked, “Will I even be invited to the wedding?”

When I found out that the professor believed I hated him, I wanted to set things straight. I wanted to go and tell him, “No, you’re the one who hates me!” I wanted to explain to him, too, that I’d had a few extraordinarily mean teachers in grade school, Mrs. McAllick and Mrs. MacMillan—both of them elderly Scotch-Irish ladies who rocked on their heels and believed that humiliation was an effective pedagogical technique. Also, I wanted him to know that I wasn’t frowning at him. It’s true that I didn’t smile much back in those days, but it was only because I had terrible teeth. (In fact, I never got braces until I was 35...but I’ve been smiling ever since, to make up for the frowning years.) I also wanted to ask the professor why he would take a frown so personally. I wasn’t anyone significant in his life, just another student. never gotten my teeth straightened; hadn’t yet gotten braces on my teeth. wasn’t ‘glaring’ at you.

But think how awkward that conversation would have been. Think how far and how deep we would have had to go in order to sort things out. Think how many details of our own characters and histories we would have to lay out before the other in order to understand why all the so-called glaring. I would have had to explain why I was so slow to smile. He would have had to tell me why he was so sensitive, so easily intimidated by a student, and there probably was a story there. That kind of vulnerability and “sharing” was just not going to happen. I would have had to tell him about my fear of teachers. He would have had to tell me how it was that he—the high profile, dignified academician—needed all his students to smile at him. The intimate details, the childhood stories, the descriptions of

our parents, the old memories we would have had to dredge up! That kind of sharing sometimes takes place between people; in fact, it's probably happening as we speak at the church's women's retreat. But for that crotchety old European scholar and me, it wasn't gonna happen. For us to come to an understanding, it would have required a bird's eye view of both our lives. And it wasn't worth it! There was no reason for it. We would never be friends. All I wanted from him was a decent grade, and all he wanted from me was that I graduate and take good care of teacher's pet, Michelle.

The beauty of that story is that the relationship between the professor and me didn't really matter all that much. But you and I both have similar stories about complete misunderstandings, complete failures of communication, that occur in relationships that matter most urgently. You, too, have similar stories about important relationships with your parents, or your spouse, or your sibling, or your child, people you love...but fail to understand, or by whom you are forever misunderstood. Many relationships are broken because of all the old baggage that both of you bring into them, your failure to hear each other, your failure to appreciate each other's journey through life, your failure to know even why you act and speak the way you do, much less why the other person does. You and I both have other, more powerful stories about relationships so tangled and knotted up with history and a breakdown of communication that they seem forever lost, irredeemable, beyond our salvaging. And it breaks our heart, because we really do love the person with whom we can't manage to have a meaningful conversation. Oh, for a just bird's eye view out across our life! Oh, for a moment of clear vision that sees all our life and theirs like a road map set out on a kitchen table! How much we could grasp, how much we could forgive—and be forgiven—if all our cards were laid out on the table for each other to see.

No, unlike Moses up on his mountaintop deathbed, we do not get a broad, expansive view out over all that our life was—and is—about, much less someone else's life. No, when you're down below in the deserts, and valleys, and gulches, and gullies of your workaday life, you don't see things in perspective. Mostly you see what's in front of you: grim professor, unsmiling student. O to see the bigger picture, the bird's eye view, by which we see clearly, by which we accept and forgive others and ourselves.

You know, if the Bible were a novel, it would get terrible reviews. It would never be featured on Oprah's Book Club. I mean, look how unceremoniously Moses gets killed off after being the main character for fully 1/8th of the book! And all he gets as an old man, at the end of his life, is a few terse, matter-of-fact sentences. No fanfare, no sentiment. What did Moses see from up on that high mountain overlooking the Promised Land? He looked out upon the thing that his years of labor had secured: the Land of Israel for the Jewish nation. And as he gazed out over its grassy hills and rich plains, did Moses allow his rheumy old eyes to wander back over the wilderness they had spent forty years crossing? Did Moses cast a backward glance in the direction of old Egypt, and the Red Sea, the valley of the Nile? Did he search the khaki-colored landscape for Mount Sinai, that spot in the desert where he first came across the burning bush, the place where his strange journey had begun, lo those forty years ago? Did he recall the stinging desert sands, the cruel rod of the Egyptian taskmasters? It all seemed so urgent at the time! It all seemed so earthshakingly important: the golden calf, the daily manna, the tablets containing those Ten Commandments. But now, just before dying, with a bird's eye view, looking back over his long years of life, what seemed urgent now? I wonder.

Everything seems urgent while we're in the throes of it. And bird's eye views are wasted on birds, who surely don't appreciate the sight. You and me, for the most part, we get an ant's eye view of life. If all your life is a great beautiful tapestry being woven on a loom, if from a distance, all the colors come together in intricate patterns and complex designs, then you and I don't see it that way. You and I—unlike a bird flying above the tapestry loom, but much like an ant crawling across the tapestry—you and I only ever see yesterday's somber grays, today's sullen tones of blue. We're too close to the events to see them as fitting together into a marvelous, meaningful whole. Perhaps our life is a great mysterious tapestry, and all its events and circumstances are slowly coming together to

create a thing of great beauty. But we're so caught up in the details of the moment (the bad economy, a newly discovered ache, seasonal affective disorder) that we fail to see the bigger picture in all its growing glory and wonder. And instead of seeing our life for the bigger, more elaborate thing that it is, we take whatever we're worried about at the time and try to make it into the thing that our whole life is about. We see a few details and assume that the rest is just more of the same, and so we feel trapped, and scared, and we start to despair.

I saw an example of this in *The Week Magazine* a few years ago. A few dozen parents in Oklahoma were accusing Fisher-Price of marketing a baby doll with a Satanic-slash-Muslim message. (As if one could be both a Satanist and a Muslim!) The "Little Mommy's Cuddle and Coo" doll was accused of mumbling "Satan is king" and "Islam is the light." Parents were enraged. Of course, Muslims are just as afraid of Satan as fundamentalist Christians are. No Muslim would ever program a Satanic message into a baby doll, and no Satanist would program a Muslim message. But that doesn't matter. The parents saw the world from a perspective of fear. It's got to do with terrorism and all the misinformation in the news these days. And so when a baby doll cooed things they couldn't understand, well, they heard the things they were thinking about, the things they feared: Islam and the devil. They took the rut they were in—the fear and the anger—and they assumed that those were the things that governed the world. Such shortsightedness! Oh, for a bird's eye view of life, of others, of ourselves!

About five years ago, my daughters discovered the word "meantime," as in the phrase "in the meantime." But they didn't know how to use it. They thought the meantime was a time when you were allowed to be mean to your sister. But the meantime is the place where you and I live our lives, down here in the gulches and gullies of our days. The meantime is where grace happens. The meantime doesn't get a clear bird's eye view of things, but it can struggle for a clearer perspective. There's always a far bigger picture than the one we see before us. There's always so much more happening than meets the eye, both in our own lives and in the lives of those people we struggle to understand. Next time you find yourself mired in the details of your life, or a confusing relationship, try to look out for the greater perspective, the bird's eye view, and you'll find yourself more able to forgive; you'll be more patient with others and yourself. And if you can't find a vantage point to see that bigger picture, then simply remind yourself that there is one! Try to remember that every person you encounter is just as complex and unfinished as yourself, and see how grace begins to happen in your relationships. Who knows, maybe when it's all over, we will get a real bird's eye view at last, to look upon the fruit of our life's labors, to see its events and experiences laid out before us from beginning to end, like a road map or a tapestry, see it all in perfect perspective. Maybe. But let's just try to see more clearly in the meantime. Amen.