

A Fresh Understanding of an Old Understanding

Did you ever wonder why we have to pray the prayer to the Holy Spirit every week? Each Sunday just before the scriptures are read, we pray asking God to open our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit that as the scriptures are read and the word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what God says to us today. Week after week, we pray the same words. And year after year we read the same scriptures. Once every three years we hear exactly the same scriptures. We read about Jesus, his birth, his baptism, his life, his ministry, his teachings, his death and his resurrection. Round and round we repeat this cycle each year and each week of the year we pray the prayer to the Holy Spirit. Why?

Two people, possibly a husband and wife are walking down a road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are grieving the loss of what they believed would be the Messiah. Funny that they should be so hopeless. They had just that day been in Jerusalem. They had just that day heard Mary's testimony that Jesus' grave was empty and that she had spoken to him. The two were not any of the eleven disciples but they were a part of the "others" who had been disciples of Jesus and in close proximity to him day after day. They were heart and soul broken as they no longer believed that this Jesus was the Messiah that they had hoped he would be. After all this Jesus was not supposed to die. This Jesus was supposed to usher in a new world order. One that put Israel at the top of the political food chain.

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But that was all squelched with the events of the past weekend. Jesus had been crucified. Murdered. Killed as a criminal. Sure he had Jesus “King of the Jews” written over him on the cross but how could he be the King of the Jews if he were dead. It was amidst this grief and despair that the pair walked the 7 miles between Jerusalem to Emmaus. And it was on this road to their home that a stranger appeared to them.

Scripture says that their eyes “were kept” from recognizing him. This was a passive verb indicating that this was something being done to the two. It was not their desire not to recognize him, nor did they turn away from him in an attempt not to know who this stranger was. No, They engaged him but even in the dialogue that follows, they do not recognize him. Their eyes “were kept” from recognizing him.

In response to the stranger’s inquiry of why they were so glum, Cleopas answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these few days? How ironic! Here Cleopas is accusing Jesus of not knowing anything about what has happened and in truth Jesus is the ONLY ONE who DOES know. But he continues to play dumb. What things? And the two begin to explain all the events that had happened, at least all that had happened from their point of view and how all hope had been lost.

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Jesus then begins to tell them just what did happen in Jerusalem – that the Messiah’s foretelling was not destroyed on the cross but fulfilled. He then began with Moses and the prophets and he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scripture.

Now, this is all very important to my original question. Why do we pray to the Holy Spirit each week asking that we might hear with joy what it is that is said to us today.

These two people were Jews. They had read Moses (which is another way of saying the first five books of the Bible or the Torah) over and over again. They knew the words of the prophets found in the rest of the Old Testament. They were well versed. It was old hat. They had probably read this stuff every week of the year and every three years they probably also had been taught the full gambit of the Old Testament at least once. Yet here, once again, on the road to Emmaus, they were hearing the same old same old ... and yet their hearts were burning within... What made the difference?

The two of them on the road actually encountered the “living word of God”. Jesus was teaching them the same old same old. But he was giving the new understanding to the old understanding and that was life giving. It caused their hearts to burn within them. It was exciting. The words were not now just historic words of recollection and rote memory. The words now were alive and hope-filled.

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Every now and then some sweet person will say something to me like, “I just don’t get it. God has never spoken to me. When I tried prayer, I was just talking to myself. This whole religion thing just seems like so much hooey.”

You know there are a number of people here this morning. But there are many, many more who are not here. How do we explain that we’re all walking down the same road, yet we see something that nine out of ten don’t?

Perhaps, you say, “They are stupid and we’re all brilliant.” (I know you don’t say that)...

But in reality it is puzzling why these folks don’t get it. In some way their eyes are kept from recognizing Jesus . Perhaps their “I just don’t get it” may not be a testimonial to their lack of intelligence but rather to their possession of a particular kind of intelligence.

In our day and age the body of knowledge we see and believe is the thangible here and now knowledge. We have a propensity toward that because it is the kind of thing we’ve all been raised on. Facts and reason. It is good for all sorts of thing, this knowledge. We are a wonderfully productive people able to build, bridges and stealth helicopters, medicinal cures for all kinds of ailments, communication technology that never stops to amaze us. But what has all this empirical thinking cost us? Douglas Sloan in his book on higher education tells us that in American universities, at least since the early 1900s, quantifiable thinking (statistics, matter,

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money) has reigned supreme while qualifiable thinking (thoughts of beauty, right and wrong, good and bad) has had a rough go of it.

You've heard of St. Augustine, Well, as a bright young man with a superior classical education, he confessed to Bishop Ambrose that he had tried to read the Bible, but frankly, he was unimpressed. To him the Bible seemed like woefully inferior literature, crudely written, poorly edited.

"You young fool," replied Ambrose. "You can't get it because when you read in the Bible about "fish" you think "fish". When you read "bread," you think "bread." Ambrose explained to him the spiritual depth of scripture, showed young Augustine levels of meaning beyond the surface appearance of things.

Thus years later, after entering this strange new world of the Bible, Augustine is sitting under a tree in a garden. He hears a child singing, "Take up and read, take up and read." Is it the voice of a child or an angel? By this time his imagination is so excited, his consciousness so heightened that he can't tell the difference. He does what the voice says, takes up the Bible, flops it open to an obscure passage from Romans, and his life is changed forever. After that, we call him St. Augustine."

What was the difference? Augustine was challenged and accepted the challenge to allow himself to read the Bible with all his faculties not with just the part of him that had been schooled in the analytical, scientific, method. And in allowing himself to let go and Let God, God was able to bring him into the truth of the Bible

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The truth of the Bible that burned in his heart. Prior to that the Bible had no relevance to him. Just words on paper and not so well written at that.

When I was in a more evangelical denomination the question was often asked by a new believer, “How do you know that you are saved, or born again, or born from above?” And one of the sure fire tests that is given is the difference in the way that person reads the Bible before and after encountering Jesus.

Most often the person who did not have a living personal relationship with Jesus had little use for the Bible. Oh, they may have tried to read it and usually they would start with Genesis with great hopes of reading it cover to cover but before long the book just fell to a heap on the floor as they zzzz'd off into snooze land. Later the Bible was picked up and put back on the shelf, not to be looked at again for a very long time. But after a person had a life changing, heart warming experiencing of making Jesus their Lord and savior, the Bible came alive. An intense desire to read the Bible was given as a sign that a person could be sure that they had come alive spiritually, that they were born from above, that they were true believers in Jesus Christ. And this intense desire to read the Bible does not dissipate as time goes by. Why?

Because, like the scriptures given to the disciples' on the road to Emmaus, Jesus makes the words and verses come alive. The living word or the living Bible creates in our heart a hope-filled, love-filled, experience and our hearts burn within us. What is the source of this phenomenon?

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It is the Holy Spirit hovering over the words of the Bible, making it come alive to us, every time we open it and read. That is why we pray to the Holy Spirit to give us ears to hear. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit who quickens that truth to our hearts and minds. The result is that we are filled with joy and hopefulness.

A very young Christian began this year by participating in a 21-day fast with a friend of mine. As the days went on he became increasingly excited about the things of the Lord ever. Every night when he came in after working a 12-14 hour day he waits on her to have a Bible study together. And every time they do it, he gets more excited about the things he is seeing in the Bible. He went from a very dry reading of Abraham's story, to understanding the promises of Abraham, to a new and inward revelation that he, himself, was included in the promises that God had made to Abraham so many years ago. Besides the Bible study, he is reading the Bible on his own. The other day he came in all excited and said to my friend, "I can't believe it, every time I read this, no matter how many times I read it, I learn something new and exciting that I missed the first time I read it." My friend just smiled and said, "Honey, that's because the Bible is a living Word. It's alive and every time you read it, it will say something to you specifically that the Holy Spirit wants you to know. The words don't change but the revelation of God to your mind, soul, and spirit does."

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That's why we pray to the Holy Spirit every Sunday. We need to approach the Bible as Jesus did in showing the two on the road to Emmaus the life-giving words of scripture. We have to approach the Bible as Saint Augustine with the conviction of its relevance so burned inside him that he no longer could discern whether the direction to pick up and read came from an angle or a little girl – did it matter? Ultimately didn't it come from the Holy Spirit. We have to approach the Bible as Petey, Carol's step-son did, knowing that it is new every morning and that there are fresh words for his body, soul and spirit helping him to live this new life with Jesus as his Lord and Savior. That is why the Bishop has encouraged us to pick up the Life Journal and read through the Bible every year and write down the new and exciting things that God teaches us as we read – Life Principals that will change our lives. Change our lives as we encounter the resurrected Lord Jesus in our own lives, day by day, verse by verse, day in and day out, year in and year out.

Lord Jesus open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word proclaimed , we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen