

"Can't See the Forest for the Trees"

19 June 2005 (*Father's Day*)

Bible passage: **I Corinthians 13:12-13** (*The Message*)

"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then; see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God just as God knows us.

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love."

Message part 1

The phrase, "Can't see the forest for the trees" is one we hear a lot, and may even find ourselves saying, but I wonder if we ever really stop to think about what it means. It has to do with being so close to a situation or experience that we can't really see the whole thing, the big picture. Sometimes that can mean that we're too involved in the details to see the situation as a whole, and it could be that some sort of an explanation is needed for us to get the big picture.

I really like a similar thought that the leadership gurus Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky share in their book *Leadership on the Line*. They talk about the importance for a leader of any type to be able, even in the midst of action, to step back and ask themselves the question, "What's really going on here?"

It is vital to gain perspective in the midst of our action and activities. For instance, a military officer has to know the importance of maintaining the capacity for reflection, even in the fog of war. A good athlete has to be able to play the game and observe it as a whole at the same time. Walt Whitman described it as "being both in and out of the game."

Heifetz and Linsky call it "getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony. They talk about dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band is playing and people are swirling around to the music, totally filling our view. Most of our attention is probably focused on our dance partner, while keeping a watchful eye on other dancers so there isn't a head-on collision. We become lost in the moment and in the music and the dancing, and when someone asks how it was, we're likely to respond, "It was great! The band was good, and everyone had a great time dancing!"

The point the two writers make is that had we gone up on the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, we might have seen a very different picture, and probably we would have noticed some very different patterns playing out. For instance, we might have observed that only some people danced to the slow music, and others danced to the fast music. As we looked around the room, we might have seen some who didn't dance at all. In other words, when we take a look at the bigger scene, we might have a very different impression that we do when we're only in the

midst of the action.

It seems to me that the same sort of thing is at work in our Bible passage for today. Now, this is the end part of the writer Paul's famous words on love, and while we hear this section at times, we don't always pay that much attention to it. Most of our focus goes toward trying to understand what he's saying about love. The more common reading of this part begins with "Now we see in a mirror dimly, then we shall see more fully." Our version today puts it like this: **"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then; see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God just as God knows us."**

Basically, Paul is saying that we may not be able to see the forest for the trees, or that we're in the middle of the dance floor. In other words, we may be too close to the action to be able to understand fully what's going on, but a time will come when we will see more clearly, when we will truly understand the big picture. I think he's talking about trying to figure out what's really important, and that we can only do that by stepping back, trying to look through God's eyes, and see what really counts. He narrows it down to faith, hope and love, with love being the most important.

It seems to me that that is a good word for us to hear on this Father's Day, because when it comes to parenting, love is the most important thing, and parenting is a priority for many of us here today. At least that's what we say, but I wonder if our actions really live it out.

Recently, I saw Tim Russert, who has been the host of "Meet the Press" for 14 years, being interviewed by Larry King. The first part of the show featured the new book that Russert has just written entitled *Big Russ and Me*, a story of his remembrances of his father.

I bought the book, but haven't had a chance to read all of it yet. However, I have skimmed the introduction where Russert tells why he wrote the book. It came after a special that the network did with its anchors who went back home to talk about their formative years and their homes. At the end of the special about Tim growing up in Buffalo, New York, he and his dad walked side-by-side, and Tim the news anchor spontaneously put his arm around his dad's shoulders, and closed by saying, "They shaped our destiny. We stand on their shoulders. Tim Russert, NBC News, Buffalo, New York." He said that after the piece aired, he was deluged with letters from all over the country—letters from people who wanted to talk about their dads.

Seeing that interview on Larry King reminded me of an article I'd clipped out a few months ago about "Meet the Press" anchor Russert and his son, Luke. In the article, he said that he was the first in his family to attend college, and then went to law school before joining NBC. Early on, his life had been about living in Manhattan, going to concerts, restaurants, and cocktail parties. But that all changed, he said, on August 22, 1985. That's the day their first and only child was born. In that article, Russert said, "At that moment, all my priorities shifted. There were no more spontaneous happy hours after work, no more late-night movies, and you couldn't have paid me to go to a dinner party. My career became secondary to the blessing of being a parent." As the sub-title to the article said, the newscaster "found his real vocation." Tim Russert could see the forest; he was on the balcony and could see the big picture. He could see clearly what was important.

That's a bit of what's going on in this clip. Take a look.

VIDEO: "Father of the Bride" --fixes wedding

Message part 2

So, I think, does Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy. Last fall, there was an article in the *Indianapolis Star* that was called "Game Plan for Fathers." His father Wil Dungy died about a year ago now, and Dungy reflected on the important things he had learned from his dad. Among them was that being a father requires commitment and compassion. The article said, "From a father's influence comes a son's belief. While the outcomes of Colts games matter passionately to Dungy, they don't compare with the prominence he places on being a father."

It sounds as though the coach can, indeed, see the forest. He understands what's important, and for him, fathering is so vitally important that he serves as the national spokesman for All Pro Dad, which is a national non-profit organization that works to help fathers get involved in their children's lives and provides programs and resources to help them become better fathers.

How does that happen? How do any of us get better in our relationships, no matter what ones we're talking about? I think Dungy has some good advice. For one thing, it's the importance of just being there. Being present and available to those we profess to love is important. How many times, I wonder, are we physically present, but our thoughts are miles away? We don't really focus on the one we're with; we don't look at them directly; we don't always spend the time we do have available wisely when it comes to being with our loved ones.

If we're present with our kids and available to them, then we're much more likely to understand them and their likes and dislikes better. We will see their personalities develop and change; we will watch them grow and mature. We will be able to value whatever stage they're in. It helps if we can teach ourselves to be in the present moment, and not always wishing that our child was a little older or younger. Once that day is gone, it won't come again. We need to learn to value the moment, for it's all we have.

I really believe that it's important that we be able to see the forest for the trees, that we can see clearly what really counts in life, and then live our lives in tune with that. But how do we begin to sort all that out? How do we figure out what's really important?

One way that I've shared with you before a number of years ago is called the "10% solution." It can help us name our priorities and hold them dear. The "10% solution is really quite simple, and it helps to clarify our values by weeding out the nonessentials. We all have 100% of life to deal with in our lives, and of that 100%, 10% is really important, and 90% is unimportant. The secret to a happy life, according to Gudrun Cable, who developed the "10% solution," is to deal with the 10% and let the 90% slip.

A psychiatrist, Daniel Amen, puts it this way: "Know what's important to you. Ask yourself what really matters in your relationships, your work and for you individually. Then ask yourself: 'Do I spend my time on things that really matter to me? Or do I spend time on other people's goals?'"

What would happen if we weeded out our 10%, and let the other 90% drop to low priority on our lists? What would our answer be if we asked ourselves if the way we're spending our time really reflects what we claim to be important? If we made a list of what really matters to us in life, who and what would be on it?

Can we see the forest for the trees? With God's help, I'm convinced that we can figure it out, and today is as good a day as any to do it.

Song:

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us will make a list of our 10%, share it with those we love, and begin to live our lives attuned to what really matters. As Shirley Soilee has said, "Your children, when grown, won't remember how clean the house was. **But they will remember how you looked when you smiled and the sound of your laughter, long after you're gone.**"

Video: "Evelyn"

Closing part 2

That's what really counts.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.