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Whole-Body Vision: Seeing with Our Whole Selves

Would you please pray with me: May I say what needs saying, May we hear what needs hearing.

Most of us here in the West have an unconscious commitment to what process theologian John Cobb calls sight-based thinking, by which he means a way of processing our sense of reality that prioritizes sight as the locus *par excellence* of our sensory experiences of the world. On this view, all of our thoughts, everything we know (or think we know), are ordered and structured according to the conclusions we draw primarily if not exclusively on the basis of visual sensory input—that is, many of us accept as true only that which our eyes can see. This has far-reaching implications and leads to many challenges—most fundamentally, a pernicious war against our own bodies. As many, many have noted, one of the defining characteristics of Western ways of thinking—specifically, again, what Cobb calls sight-based thinking—are the spirit-body dualisms that have infected Western societies and, indeed, the Christian tradition. Whatever one may think of Cobb’s assessment, there is no missing the deep-seated aversion to all things material laid and mixed into the ancient foundations of early Christian life. Whether through negative characterizations of beastly lust or through the valorization of figures who purportedly denied their natural sexual appetites, there’s no denying that Christianity—or, perhaps more accurately, Christianities (plural)—have, by and large, sustained a vociferous dismissal of bodily, let alone sensual, experiences of the world.

But Cobb points to another feature of sight-based thinking that more directly speaks to our passage today, namely, that sight-based thinking causes us to see only that which fits into an already established context, which is to say it causes us to miss possibilities right in front of us. We are so easily misled by the limitations of our eyes, which are constantly duped by illusions of all kinds, as we dismiss other forms, including nonsensory forms, of perception. Now perhaps this can be overstated, but I think Cobb’s point here is an important one, especially in view of our passage

today, which offers a rich example of how a practiced dependence on a narrow way of seeing the world around us inhibits what we might see.

Our text today opens with two disciples, one of them named Cleopas, heading West from Jerusalem on their way to the village of Emmaus. Now we don't know the specific circumstances surrounding Cleopas and his companion's journey to Emmaus, but it seems clear enough from his response to the stranger, whom we know right away as Jesus, that they're heading back to Emmaus following a grave disappointment. They've received the report offered by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James that Jesus's tomb is empty, and they appear to have concluded that this movement is over. It would seem that Cleopas and his companion were in Jerusalem because they believed deeply that this man Jesus was a great prophet—"mighty in deed and word before God and all the people"—a great prophet whom they were sure would right the historic wrongs of their subjugation to Roman imperial power and establish God's people once more as a force in the world. As Cleopas puts it, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." The disciples on the road now seem dubious as to the prospects for this Jesus movement, and I can scarcely blame them. After all, prophetic and messianic movements were very common in those times, and sorting them all out must have grown tiresome. But Cleopas and his companion were convinced that this Jesus was the genuine article, the one on whom they could rest their hope. The trouble, though, is that their hope is tied to a particular way of seeing redemption, which for them could only be recognized in the patterns and permutations of worldly, domineering power. Cleopas and his companion are primed to see power and, thus, their redemption in this narrow sense. When our dear stranger Jesus meets them on the road, defeated, their hopes crushed, they can see only failure and the end of the movement they upended their lives to join. As they travel on their way, they're unable to recognize the stranger as their Lord, as verse 16 says, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." This use of the passive voice here is most intriguing, echoing as it does other instances in scripture where divine intervention precludes recognition and understanding, presumably because the would-be recognizers are not yet ready to receive the luminous truth.

Only when they are at table with Jesus, entering into that most fulsome of embodied experiences, the breaking of bread one with another, are they able actually to *see* Christ among them. Only then did they reflect on all that Jesus had said and realized that while he was talking the excitement pulsing in their very bodies, thumping in their chests, that was the moment when their bodies attested the presence of the risen Christ among them. I love how one biblical scholar puts it, “The locus of recognition is the community’s liturgical fellowship, the only circumstance in which a moment of ‘attuning’ between the human recipient and the risen Messiah in his glorified state is achieved.” It is in this moment that the disciples realize how utterly oblivious they had been not to realize who this was: “their eyes were opened” upon realizing that their bodies—indeed, their very beings—were telling them all along who this stranger was—“were not our hearts burning within us?” While Cleopas waxed morose about the failure of Jesus’s redemption project, which was a perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw based on what he and his fellow disciples observed with their very own eyes, Jesus offered a fresh perspective on all they thought they knew about what was to come. They were so excited they went right on back to Jerusalem, filled to the brim with renewed hope and purpose.

Friends, what are our bodies telling us? Where do we hold our hopes, our anxieties, our fears, our disappointments, our tension? Our bodies speak a greater truth than we can fully appreciate when we rely too much on what we can see for the moment, or reality as it presently presents itself. As we move forward in our visioning process, we are asking, why does Centre exist? What is Centre’s purpose, and what might Centre be? One of the most vital, if not the most vital, roles that the church is called to fill is that of inspiring and holding moral imagination—of seeing possibility where others see impossibly long odds and dead-ends. As we look ahead, we can see there’s no shortage of obstacles. We see the membership. We see the budget. We see the prospects. But I pray that we bring more to this visioning than that which eyes alone can see. I pray that we are able to come together in fellowship, to recognize that which makes our hearts burn, and to find that

which stirs us toward the promise of a community that has never been but might yet be. May it be so. Amen.