

## Pentecost 4 – June 28, 2020 Cycle A

I've thought quite a bit about what I might say today. It's not been easy to decide. You all know that before I became a pastor, I worked 20 years in the oil industry. Perhaps I've left the impression that I did not enjoy that time very much. Well that's not wholly true. I definitely enjoyed the pay! All kidding aside, I did enjoy my years in the oil business: the people I worked with, the things I learned, and the places I got to experience. That last part was not something I appreciated at the time. Oil is mostly not found in "nice" places. There is no oil in Hawaii, Tahiti, or the Alps. There is oil in Alaska – a very beautiful place – but on the "North Slope": a frozen wasteland in winter and a muddy, mosquito-infested swamp in summer! To be honest, I did get to see many beautiful sights while traveling to and from the "oilfield". London, Paris, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Denver, Anchorage, and Moscow among them. I went to Munich many times, but only the airport. But more than any picturesque view, what my travels granted me was perspective – the chance to meet people in faraway cultures and glimpse life through their eyes. This is easily the most meaningful and important thing I gained during my years prospecting for oil and gas.

Perspective. Although vital, it's not something we give much thought to. If you lived your life surrounded by dense pine forests, you'd perhaps fail to appreciate the beauty of a single pine tree, its fresh smell and majestic height. I remember the first time that my parents drove us from Texas up into the pine covered mountains of Colorado. The sight was brehtaking. Even more, as we got out at a rest stop... the snow and cool crisp air, the smell of the trees – that experience alone was worth the trip! On the other "end" of things, I can remember driving to Midland to start work just after graduating from college. Traveling through the Hill Country was nice – a place I had experienced during geology field classes. But after passing San Angelo, the beauty of the Hill Country fades as you ascend to the seemingly endless High Plains of West Texas. Notwithstanding the fancifully named towns – Sterling City, Garden City, and the like – the bleakness of the landscape deepens with each "tick" on the odometer. Approaching Midland from the south, the first thing I noticed were the tops of the "tall" buildings of downtown – not especially tall, maybe 25 stories. But on a featureless plain, they're visible for miles. It's all a matter of perspective...

Years later, I was transferred back to Midland – my company having closed their Denver offices. Some of my colleagues – those who grew up in Colorado – couldn't "take it" and quit rather than live in Midland. It has to be admitted, Midland, Odessa, Kermit, Monahans, Levelland... these are not "sights" found on postcards and travel brochures! On a hot August day, as the heat rises in waves above the plain, most people cannot imagine a less hospitable place. But go out into that same desert at midnight, and you'll see a sight few in the US even know exists – the Milky Way, at times so bright you can imagine being able to read just by starlight! Perspective. It's all important.

In 1995 the director of the Hubble Space Telescope used his "discretionary" time to point the most sensitive, highest resolution camera on the spacecraft at one of the loneliest, "emptiest" parts of the sky "known" – a spot where ground-based telescopes reveal nothing. Acquiring his "target", the director opened the imager for the equivalent of 100 hours of exposure, just to see what might be lurking "out there, beyond the stars". For perspective, the area exposed to the telescope's "eye" is about the same as what you could cover with a grain of sand, balanced on the tip of your finger at arms-length. When the data were retrieved and processed, do you know what

they found in that grain-of-sand-sized bit of sky? More than 4600 galaxies! Today that image is called the “Hubble Deep Field”. It proved such an amazing discovery that the experiment has since been repeated many times – in various parts of the sky and with improved cameras aboard the HST. In each case the result has been the same – unimaginable numbers of galaxies, more than hundred billion, each filled with hundreds of billions of stars! How many stars are in the heavens, no one can say. But the smallest number, proved by Hubble, is that there are at least 38 trillion stars in the universe for each person on earth (all 7.8 billion of us)! Perspective. It has an effect on things – especially when it’s missing.

Turn on the news and you’d never guess. According to most reporting, the earth is infested with large numbers of the most despicable things around – human beings! Well, that’s not exactly true. The “despicable” ones are those who have the audacity to hold opinions “other” than those with which the news commentator agrees! Lost is the notion that our lives can be enriched by the ideas and perspectives of others, made more whole, more complete; that the experience of every person has value and should be honored, rather than ridiculed. Lost is the knowledge of how rare and precious each and every person is. The universe has gold, silver, platinum, and diamonds in amounts beyond reckoning. Rare and beautiful are blue planets teeming with life – beings capable of gazing out at the universe and wondering “What it’s all about?” and “Who made this wondrous place?”!

Whereas ancient peoples looked up and wondered about the great beyond, modern people spend their days gazing into a mirror – both literal and philosophical – rejecting anything that doesn’t fit with the image they want to see. Imagining that “we’re in charge”, we’ve lost the ability to realize we’re not! Humanity is impossibly tiny as compared to the whole of creation! What’s truly unique is our perspective: the opportunity we’ve been given to experience and enjoy one of the rarest environments in existence, and do so in the company of some of the rarest and most precious things in existence – other human beings! So why do so many people waste their lives in bitterness, jealousy, and self-absorption? Perspective, or lack of it. They’ve lost sight of God’s created order and our place within it. As with living within a great pine forest, many people fail to see the wonder of what human beings are in the people around them! How else to explain the callous disregard for others so common today? Last week a 92-year-old woman with a walker was struck and knocked to the sidewalk, hitting her head on a fire hydrant. Her attacker? A 31-year-old male who viewed another human being merely as something to be “shoved out of the way”!

Perspective. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life”! (John 3:16) In God’s eyes, all human beings are that precious! Why then can we not see each other that way? Do we not realize that whoever welcomes one of God’s precious children, in fact, welcomes Christ himself? God stands ready to hold sacred even the act of sharing a cup of cold water with someone in need! That is the depth of God’s love and patience for each and every person! And yet, we fail to notice...

In this, my last sermon as pastor in this place, I want each and every one of you to know and believe in your heart just how loved and precious you are in God’s eyes – as indeed you are in mine! I have been enriched by your company and granted perspective far beyond my own. May you continue to love and cherish one another throughout all the days ahead, until we are gathered once again in God’s Heavenly Kingdom! Amen