

A Fore-Edge Life
Colossians 1:1-14
7/10/2016

Now you see it; now you don't. I'm not talking about a magic trick, but rather a form of artwork called fore-edge painting. It's a scene painted on the edges of the pages of a book that can be seen only when the pages are fanned.

The art is applied to the edge of the margin of the individual pages and not to the actual fore-edge of the book itself (so named to differentiate it from the spine edge). When the book is closed, you don't see the image because it's hidden by the gold leaf on the actual page edges. But when the book is spread open, the surprisingly beautiful artwork appears.

Few people have ever actually seen these literary decorations. As Anne Bromer says in her introduction to the collection at the Boston Public Library, one of the best collections of fore-edge painting in the country, "They are an obscure art form, hidden beneath a surface of gold. When revealed, there is only wonderment! It is as if you discovered magic on a book before you even read its opening lines."

Painting on the edge of the pages was under way by the 16th century, and the paintings were usually portraits which one could easily see when the covers of the book were closed. But, Bromer says, in the 17th century in England "Samuel Mearne, a bookbinder to the royal family, developed the art of the 'disappearing painting' on the fore-edge of a book." To see these paintings -- the pages of the book must be fanned.

The pages must be ruffled and disturbed. Otherwise, their beauty remains hidden.

Sort of like our lives ... beauty that often is not seen until we're ruffled and disturbed.

Let's go to our text where the apostle Paul tells the Colossian Christians that he and his coworkers have noticed their faith. Unlike some of the other churches to which Paul wrote, he was not involved in the founding of the Colossian congregation. In fact, according to 2:1, he's never seen the

believers there "face to face." What he knows of them is from a report by Epaphras, the Christian who established the church, "and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit" (v. 8). Apparently, when the book of their lives was opened, a beautiful picture appeared.

Paul goes on to describe the various textures, colors and images of their faith, hope and love. He writes, "We keep getting reports on your steady faith in Christ, our Jesus, and the love you continuously extend to all Christians. The lines of purpose in your lives never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taut by hope" (vv. 4-5, The Message).

Theoretical or applied?

Well, what's revealed in your life when something or someone ruffles your pages? How about, for example, when you're in conversation with someone you love and a disagreement arises. Is your response something beautiful?

Let me ask that another way: Is your Christianity something that's theoretical or something that's applied? You've probably heard the word "applied" associated with "science." Applied science is different from what is sometimes called "pure science" in that pure science primarily pursues knowledge about the world, the cosmos or some specific field for the purpose of understanding it, but without any concern as to what to do with that knowledge.

There's certainly a place for pure science. But applied science means taking the discoveries of pure science and putting them to work to solve practical problems or to improve conditions for people in real life.

What the apostle has to say in our text reminds us that he's talking about applied theology, applied Christianity. He writes, "We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9).

If we are going to have a knowledge of God's will, there's no other way to get it than to follow Jesus. For this to happen, there is a sense in which we need to do a "pure" study of him. That is, we need to know what Jesus said and did. But the purpose of our pure research is to aid us in applying what we learn about Jesus to how we live and how we interact with others. The more we know about Jesus (pure knowledge), the better we're able to follow him

(applied knowledge). The more we read the gospels and see how he handled the things that fanned his "pages," the better we're able to live the same way in our own discipleship.

How do we research Jesus?

One way to get at that is to consider what advice you'd give to a new Christian. Suppose somebody says to you, "I have just accepted Jesus. What do I do next?" How would you answer that person? Is there a "step one" that comes to mind?

One piece of advice you can surely give is to tell the person that he or she needs to connect with a congregation and start going to church. But assuming they've already done that, what else would you suggest as an important next step?

How about this? "Go home and read the Sermon on the Mount -- chapters 5-7 of Matthew -- then try to live your life according to what Jesus said there.

"And for a next step, read the whole gospel of Luke (or any of the gospels) and do the same thing. Try to put what you learn about Jesus into practice in your own life."

Did you notice in that advice that you can't easily talk about pure knowledge of Jesus without sliding over into how to apply it?

Those are not the only instructions we could give, but they are a terrific place to start because the primary meaning of the word "Christian" is "follower of Jesus" or "imitator of Christ." And how can we follow or copy one about whom we know little?

Of course, there is more to being a Christian than that, but there is no being a Christian without that. Here's the thing: Generally, reading the Sermon on the Mount or the gospels is not enough exposure to knowledge about Jesus to shape our lives toward him.

In a sense, telling a new Christian to go home and read the Sermon on the Mount or the book of Luke is little more than a piece of shorthand advice. But if the person really does it -- if we really do it -- if we read those Scriptures with the idea that we want to apply what we are learning about Jesus to our own lives, we will be painting beautiful art on the pages of the book that is our life.

Commitment is important for a fore-edge life

To say this yet another way, knowledge about Jesus, to be effective, has to be linked with commitment. There are people who are quite well-informed about Jesus, but who do not put what they know of Christ into practice in their lives.

It happens that one of the leading authorities today on the life of Christ is a professor who chairs the department of religious studies at a major university, and who has written some books about Jesus and about Scripture. But what this scholar does not do is to suggest how his readers might apply his discoveries and interpretations about Jesus to one's life. He's got the pure science of Jesus down cold; but that's where his research ends.

When asked about this, the learned professor replied that he himself didn't apply his knowledge of Jesus to anything in his life because, when it comes to God and the whole Jesus thing, he's an agnostic! Knowledge about Jesus, in his case, does not translate into knowledge of Jesus. It did not become a support for faith.

Keep learning Jesus

So, if the title of our book is to include both our name and the label "Disciple of Jesus," we also need to keep applying what we know of Jesus, and what we continue to learn about him as we study the Bible.

"Continue to learn" is an important stipulation. Sometimes we who have been on the Christian path for a while stop learning about Jesus. We've read the gospels, or at least have been exposed to them, and we have a sense of who Jesus is and what he did. But there is more to learn. It's awfully easy to fly by the seat of our pants in life instead of intentionally trying to put what we know of Jesus to work in our lives. Being a Christian also means continually and intentionally following him.

How can one have a fore-edge life? And the answer is that one needs to apply one's knowledge of Christ to the nitty-gritty of life. Then, when the pages get ruffled, not to worry: Something beautiful, even magical will appear.

Such was the experience of the Colossian believers, and it can be ours as well. Their fore-edge life in Christ revealed a portrait of faith and love (v. 4);

lives that were "worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him (v. 10); lives that were bearing "fruit" (v. 10); and lives that were being made "strong," and capable of enduring "everything with patience" (v. 11).

In light of the acts of violence this week I want to close by sharing these words from Martin Luther King Jr.: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

If we are true Christ imitators, violence and hatred will not be a part of our lives or actions toward others, but love for our neighbor and for the least and the lost and the left out will inform all we say and do.

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In this scripture reading from Paul's letter to a faith community, we hear that when we are learning of God's ways, we continue to grow in faith, and the good news of that journey is contagious, bringing joy to others.

Colossians 1:1-14

Common English Bible:

From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy our brother.

To the holy and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. We've done this since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all God's people. You have this faith and love because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You previously heard about this hope through the true message, the good news, which has come to you. This message has been bearing fruit and growing among you since the day you heard and truly understood God's grace, in the same way that it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world. You learned it from Epaphras, who is the fellow slave we love and Christ's faithful minister for your sake. He informed us of your love in the Spirit.

Because of this, since the day we heard about you, we haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding. We're praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God; by being strengthened through his glorious might so that you endure everything and have patience; and by giving thanks with joy to the Father. He made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God's holy people. He rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. He set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and doing of this holy word.