

The Big Picture

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

July 29, 2018

Ephesians 3:14–21

*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend,
with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length
and height and depth,
and to know
the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

Two weeks ago Tammi and I were in New York City. While we were there, on that Saturday, we finally took some time to go to MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art.

I am so glad we did!

It's an amazing place. I want to go back!

Because even though we were there for two hours, and what we saw was great, there was so much we did not see.

That whole thing about two hours being kind of not enough when visiting an outstanding museum such as MoMA, it reminds me of this scene from “National Lampoon’s European Vacation.”

Actually, it’s a scene I’ve not really, um, *seen*. I’ve only been told about it. Because, as a matter of principal, I refuse to see Chevy Chase’s “Vacation” movies. Come on now: they stole my name, “Griswold,” to use it, abuse it for comedy. For 35 years now, people think they’re being winsome and endearing with me by asking if I were on vacation or by calling me “Clark.” Ha ha. Very funny.

“Yes, we are on vacation. And we’d like to order some food now, ‘kay?”

I know, my loss. I really ought to get over my snit and watch these movies, at least the first one. My cultural education is incomplete without it!

Anyway, there’s this scene in “European Vacation.” Clark Griswold and his family are in Paris. They’re rushing around trying to see as many of the sights as they can. They get to the Louvre, the major and historic museum of fine art, home to many famous and priceless masterpieces. They show up a bit later than expected. So Clark says to his wife, “Honey, it closes in 15 minutes and there’s 100,000 works of art to see — c’mon!”

Among the many things Tammi and I enjoyed seeing at MoMA were some of Monet’s water lilies paintings. The French impressionist painter Claude Monet loved water lilies. He had a flower garden at his home that contained water lilies. So he painted them. He produced about 250 oil paintings of water lilies throughout his career. I’m sure most of you have seen a photograph or a print of one of his paintings in his famous series.

One of the Monet water lilies we saw at MoMA was *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond*. I was amazed at how big it is: 6 1/2 feet by 42 feet, on three adjacent panels.

Now that's a big picture!

Seeing it in real life and so large was really moving. The impact of this painting in all its massive presence made me feel that before then I knew hardly anything about Monet's water lilies. Seeing how much more was there than I had realized opened up for me the beauty of Monet's work.

I had seen the big picture. And then my eyes were opened.

At MoMA we also saw Vincent Van Gogh's tremendously famous *The Starry Night*. And this was, in a literal sense, the opposite of the Monet experience. Because I had this expectation that *The Starry Night* would be large, maybe not as big as that Monet, but even so somewhat impressive in size. But it isn't. It's only 2 1/2 feet by 3 feet.

Yet I still had a "big picture" experience of *The Starry Night*. Near this painting was another Van Gogh painting, *Olive Trees in a Mountainous Landscape*. It's about the same size as *The Starry Night*. The style of painting is very similar. It turns out that Van Gogh painted them both around the same time, intending "olive trees" to complement *The Starry Night*.

I thought that was pretty cool. And it made *The Starry Night* even more meaningful, even more beautiful, for me.

But that's not all. I also learned that Van Gogh painted both of these masterpieces at the asylum where he had voluntarily committed himself after a serious mental breakdown. Both of these works, the wildly famous one and its companion, come out of deep pain and intense suffering, yes, *come out of it*, after the ugliness and despair expressing beauty and perhaps even hope.

I had seen the big picture. And then my eyes were opened.



But my job here is not to talk about paintings and fine art. Rather, my job here this morning is to reflect with you on scripture, seeking to discern the word of God for us today and to declare it.

And my job, our job together, is made somewhat difficult because the Bible passage before us is somewhat difficult.

It's not a story, or a command, or a song.

It doesn't consist of easily listed points.

It isn't laid out in straight lines.

No, these verses, these maddening and delightful verses,

they push and pull,
they rush ahead,
they go this way and that,
they encourage
and they pray
and they burst open with joy.

Our translators have helpfully broken these verses into short sentences (or shorter ones, anyway), to make them easier for us to follow. But in the Greek we find that these verses just go and go, with verses 14 through 19 being one big long sentence.

As I read it, I find that big sentence pulsing with enthusiasm, brimming with passion, as if Paul can barely contain his love for God and his love for his friends.

That's some of the big picture with this passage. But there's more.

Because I think that not just *how* Paul says it but *what* Paul says is all about big picture stuff. He is telling his friends in Christ, he's telling other Christians, that he prays for them.

Now, in his prayers he asks God

not for little things,
not for selfish things,
not that they be rich or happy or comfortable,
not even that they "have a blessed day."

No, he prays to God

for big things,
amazing things,
impossible things ...
or rather things that sure seem to be impossible.

*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend,
with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length
and height and depth,
and to know
the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

In case it isn't clear, this is what Paul asks God: to give his fellow Christians such power that they are able

to comprehend the incomprehensible,
to know the unknowable,
and to be filled with God's own limitless being.

He asks God to give them what seems to be impossible. And he trusts that God can and will give it.

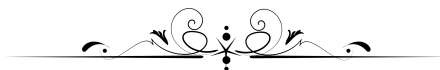
God will make them able to understand the whole encyclopedia of Christ's love.

God will make them able to know the beyond-their-ability-to-know-it love of Jesus.

God will fill them with God's own fullness.

Now that's a big picture.

Can we see it? Will our eyes, and our hearts, be opened?



What I am seeing in this big picture is a vision of the Christian life. And it strikes me that it's broad and extensive, unlike what often passes for "Christian life" these days. This is an understanding of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus, an understanding — to be honest, to be blunt — that should shame us for how narrow we commonly understand it and practice it.

This is a big picture vision, painting our relationship to Jesus,

not as a still life,
not as a certificate in a frame on your wall,
not as knick-knacks on a shelf,
not as a mere fact from the past,
not even as life-long membership in a congregation,

but as a growing and expanding and deepening bond of love.

This is a big picture vision, with brush strokes marking a horizon that holds in its embrace not simply our contentment nor our reward but union with Christ and the glory of God.

This is a big picture vision, with colors that startle as well as soothe, with lines that challenge as well as comfort, seeking to bring us *out of* ourselves so that we may more truly *be* ourselves.

This is a big picture vision, using textures and hues that declare a holy truth which mocks the lies we tell, lies that may wear religious clothing but are instead clothes of hate, lies such as the one that says that only those

who look like us,
who sound like us,
who think like us,
who agree with us,

only those

who share our citizenship,
who share our language,
who share our racial background,

only *those* have a family connection with us. These are lies, and the big picture, demanding to be seen and felt, likewise demands that we seek and see God's familial love,

his "fatherhood,"
his parental compassion,
his mothering spirit,

in *all* families.

Can we see it? Will our eyes, and our hearts, be opened?

The big picture, seen in these verses, is God's limitless mercy.

The big picture, felt in these words, is God's boundless power.

Can we see it? Will our eyes, and our hearts, be opened?

The big picture is the love of Jesus that cannot be known, and yet it can!

The big picture is the church of Jesus (we ourselves!), by all reasonable expectation unable to triumph, and yet we do!

The big picture is about a meaning that transcends us, yet includes us, even us, and includes also those we may not expect to include, those we may not want to include, but whom we are commanded to include.

Can we see it? Will our eyes, and our hearts, be opened?

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