

“Courage to Overcome History”

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When I went to college I knew that I would be a religion major, so I put down philosophy as my minor, because I knew that - or thought I knew - that's what ministers did. They thought about big things, so I should have a philosophy minor - until I took my first philosophy class. [Laughter.] That was the end of that minor. But in the few philosophy classes that I took - and most of which I can't remember at all - I do remember taking a class on Plato, and we had to read “The Republic.”

At the beginning of the seventh chapter of “The Republic,” there is this really neat story that I have held on to, to help me explain my faith, and why I can be a rational thinker and still believe in God through Jesus Christ - and I got it from a philosopher.

Now, Plato writes this story in this allegory called “The Allegory of the Cave.” In this story, he writes about how Socrates - his mentor - is speaking to Glaucon - his brother - and Socrates is telling his brother this story: The story is about a group of people who were chained together tightly in a cave. They were bound together so tightly in this cave that they could not turn to see behind them; they could only look straight ahead. Their whole world was looking at a blank wall of a cave. Behind them was a fire to keep them warm and help feed them, and behind that was this entire group of people who would come in and out every day, to stoke the fire, and talk and feed them.

As they were talking, they would go about their work. But what they didn't realize, according to Socrates speaking to Glaucon, is that when they were sitting here chained to the wall, they saw shadows bouncing from the people who were moving behind them, off the fire, and it made shadows on the wall. Socrates said those shadows, and the voices behind them, were all that the people chained together could ever understand in their world. Their vision - their world view - was no bigger than that wall and those shadows. So the people believed, in their narrow vision of the world, that those shadows were the ones speaking in that room, that echoed throughout the cave. They believed that the shadows were taking care of them - feeding them. That the shadows were having the voices going on behind. Socrates would say that all of us have a vision that's confined to what we can see and experience.

Now, one day, according to Socrates, as he continues to tell the story, one of the prisoners, who were chained together staring at that wall, got free - ran out, ran out in front, into the glaring sun that he had never seen before, and it was so bright it hurt. He ran back in and slipped his chains back on because he was scared; because he couldn't experience anything that bright, that new. He told the others to stay where they were, because it was evil outside the cave. There was death there.

Finally, according to Socrates and this allegory, others came and tried to free these people, who were chained from their childhood against that wall, and they wouldn't go. Socrates said you could drag them out and they would fight to the death to not leave their cave, because it was all they knew. And, because it was so bright out there, and they couldn't see, and they were sure they were going to die. Now, Socrates would go on to explain that that

was what intellect and education is for: to help expand one's vision; because if you have that narrow vision of the world, like those in the cave, you will never experience the true fullness and richness of this world.

Now, I take that a little bit further. I would argue from Plato's writings of Socrates that we cannot trust our five senses - in our rational minds - to tell us the true riches of what the world has experiencing for us. We are all facing our own blank wall and often what we think through our five senses is truth, is reality - isn't reality at all. It is only our small perception. So those people who claim, "I cannot experience God. I don't believe there is a God, until I can experience God with my own senses - until I can see God, hear the voice of God, feel God, smell, taste and touch. Until I can experience God, I cannot be a believer. And the rest of you who are believers I worry about, because to deny your senses - to deny your rational mind - is to be ignorant. How can you be a follower of a God that you cannot experience with your five senses? How can you believe in a God you can't see, you can't touch, you can't hear, you can't see, you can't smell, can't taste? You must be idiots."

And my argument back to the many people who make fun of us, because we are irrationally believing in God, is to tell them the story of Plato's writing down of Socrates teachings to his brother Glaucon about the cave, and say, "You can't trust, buddy, your own senses, because your senses are limited by your experience, and your experience has not expanded wide enough to see the God that the rest of us experience in our lives."

If people who don't know God would just turn around and stop looking at the shadows of their own rationalism, they would see God working in this world. But they are too scared to go out and see the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to go out and experience that bright light of truth and faith, love and hope. So they sit there in their cave of their own rationalism and their own five senses. They listen to the shadows. They hear the voice of God and they call it science, or they call it lucky, or they call it medicine, but they never understand that it is God's hand at work.

Rationalism and the five senses are not to be trusted alone, because we are all looking at the cave from our own very narrow perspective, not understanding that there is something even greater beyond. Those of us who have been blessed with the opportunity to sense God through a sixth sense, or the light of God burning inside, or at least trusting in something greater than ourselves - we know we can only see in our own cave. We see through that fire dimly, but we know something else is going on behind us: the spirit of God moving, speaking to us.

We, too, if we ran out of the cave of our own experience, and went out and saw the bright light of God, we would probably die, too. I think that is why in the Old Testament it is very clear that if we ever saw the face of God we would die. We are too much like the people chained in that cave. We can't experience the light of the sun without [it] burning us so badly that we would run back into the cave.

We need to take it slow. To slowly, in prayer and in worship and in struggling and working with our faith; to expand our experiences to expand our vision, so that we can slowly move into God's light - that we will not fully experience until we go through our own resurrection, as Jesus did.

But, until that day, we are to be stretched beyond our comfort zone. That is why we send kids on mission trips; that is why adults go on mission trips; that is why we go to book studies and education classes and we try to find things that draw us beyond our comfort zone. So that God can speak to us in new ways; so that the light of God can shine even a little bit more, taking away the shadows of lies, the shadows of misconception and allow us to see the real truth.

So the next time you are harassed, or made fun of, or made to feel insecure, because you believe and you are not rational enough, or you are not using your five senses to make decisions for your life - like the atheists are so fond of reminding us - think about Plato and the teachings of Socrates and "The Allegory of the Cave." Think about how they used their five senses. They used everything at their disposal and their rationalizations were all wrong.

The people in Nazareth who knew Jesus all of their lives, were staring at the Messiah but they couldn't see the brightness of Jesus' light, so they continued to see him through the shadows of a carpenter's son. They saw Jesus, but it wasn't all of Jesus.

Our life's work as human beings - of people of faith - is to stop seeing the shadows and see the real, rational God at work. It takes a lifetime to find your way to the light, and it's what we are in the process of doing each and every day. We pray that God will lead us to that light for all eternity. Amen