

In God's Eyes

Chris Currie

Genesis 15:1-12

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About a decade ago, Bill Bishop, a reporter and journalist who worked for newspapers in Austin, Texas, but also small towns in Texas and eastern Kentucky, began to notice something. It was not just him; we all probably observed it or at least experienced some of the results of it. Americans were more politically polarized than ever. Bishop wanted to know why so he and Robert Cushing, a professor at the University of Texas began researching data from advertising firms, county records, IRS data, and studies of various demographic shifts throughout the country. What they found was a much greater shift than just political polarization; they found what they called the 'big sort.' Bishop puts it this way: 'the more we looked, the more it became clear that migration itself wasn't driving the country's political segregation. We were seeing something more basic—a cultural shift powered by prosperity and economic security. Freed from want and worry, people were reordering their lives around their values, their tastes, and their beliefs (political, cultural, religious, and otherwise).' He continues that in the last generation or so, roughly 25 years ago, people were 'clustering in communities of like-mindedness, and not just geographically. Churches grew more politically homogeneous during this time, and so did civic clubs, volunteer organizations, and, dramatically, political parties.' Bishop interviewed marketing analyst J. Walter Smith who described the phenomenon as 'self-invention' a desire to shape and control all our identities and surroundings. Technology, migration, and material abundance all allow [us] to wrap ourselves into cocoons entirely of our own making,' and according to Smith, we are unwilling to live with tradeoffs, so we recreate our 'environments to fit what we want in all kinds of ways and one of the ways is finding communities that fit our values—where,' and I want to emphasize this, 'we don't have to live with neighbors or community groups that might force us to compromise on our principles and tastes.'¹

While on the whole our society may becoming more diverse and culturally heterogeneous at the broad level, we are opting for more and more homogenous settings at the ground level. Bishop concludes: 'As people seek out the social settings they prefer—as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable—the nation grows more politically [and culturally] segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogenous groups. We all live with the results: balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible; a growing

¹ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, 12-14.

intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible;’ and a political polarization that are no longer see others with rival political commitments, but bitter opponents advocating a different way of life, good on the one side and evil on the other.²

Not unrelated to the ‘Big Sort,’ at the New Orleans Book Festival on the campus of Tulane this past week, New York Times columnist and writer David Brooks spoke and declared that we are experiencing an epidemic of blindness in our society and country. Our level of distrust of our neighbors went from 20% a generation ago to 60% today. Anxiety levels have doubled since 2008 and too many people alive today do not feel seen, respected, heard, and understood. The irony is that the more we have sought to style our world around us exactly to our individual tastes, the more we have ensconced ourselves into communities of the like-minded, the more we have self-selected for people like us, and the more lonely, unseen, brittle, and untrusting we have become. An epidemic of blindness. If you read the New Testament, there are a lot of occasions where a blind person is able to see the power of God disclosed in Jesus in ways that a lot of people with perfectly good eyesight cannot. Sometimes we see what we want to see, even when something else is right in front of us. Brooks shared the illustration from sociological research of the gorilla experiment where a group of people are asked to pass a basketball around and count how many times they pass it. After a few minutes someone comes in and asks how many passes they made. 64 they respond. The researcher says okay and then asks, what about the gorilla? No one knows what he is talking about until they are shown a video of a man in a gorilla suit who walks right into the midst of the group for 8 seconds while they are engaged in their task, but they are so focused on counting their passes that they never see him. Unseen.

Perhaps one of the most poorly defined notions in all of Christianity is something very central to our existence, that is, faith. It gets reduced to a set of specific beliefs or a list of statements of beliefs that we have to give some form of assent to, intellectual or otherwise. Equally reductionistic and misguided is characterizing faith as nothing more than a passing emotion. Many years ago I was teaching a class on faith and we were discussing that faith is a gift and there is no prerequisite for it and that there is nothing we can ‘do’ to earn it or salvation or work our way into God’s favor. Faith is not an achievement we can attain. ‘So there is nothing I have to do,’ one of the participants asked. ‘No condition I must meet? No required minimum?’ Nothing, was the response. ‘Then what is the point? Why am I here? Why put in any effort if there is not a requirement for it? All good questions by the way.

² Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, 12-14.

Which brings us perhaps the long way round to our passage from Genesis, where we find Abram who has already been promised once in Genesis 12 that the Lord will make of him a great nation, that he will have more descendants than there are stars in the sky, and that he will be a blessing to the nations. Our passage today is three chapters after Abraham has already been promised all these things in Genesis 12, but just three chapters later impatient Abram is not seeing it bear much fruit. In fact, he challenges the validity of this promise directly with God: 'O Lord, I continue childless, you have given me no offspring, and I have no legitimate heir.' Abraham has received the promise in faith but his reality showing much evidence of it. To put him in today's parlance, he knows the kingdom of God is justice and peace, and yet all that seems to surround him is a world of pandemic followed by a world of pointless war in Europe followed by impending global catastrophe. Where is the kingdom of God in all the muck? And once again, God does not immediately produce for him an heir or give Abram an instant answer to his wrestling faith, but rather reminds him of the promise made to him. 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' 'So shall your descendants be.' Then Genesis tells us, that Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness (v.6).'

In the history of faith, that brief verse may have more reverberations than any in all of scripture. Abraham trusted in God, and God reckoned that trust as righteousness. There is our definition of faith. Not a set of beliefs, not a right religious mindset, not a appropriate piety, but trust in the One who made us, the One who shows up, the one who keep his promises. Again, it is not like Abraham was squeaky clean or that the point of his faith was ever to achieve some level of righteousness, but rather Genesis tells us, because Abraham trusted in God's promises, God chose to see him as righteous. By faith, God chose to see Abraham that way. Even with all his baggage. Even knowing he was still in process, even still on his way to becoming. Not perfect; not sinless; carrying plenty of rough edges. Yet nevertheless, in the eyes of God, even though he did not claim he was righteous, did not look righteous, was far from ever achieving righteousness on his own, Genesis tells us that God reckons him that way. In God's eyes, that is what he is.

The apostle Paul picks up this exact theme in Romans reminds us that 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' directly quoting our passage today, and reminding us by trusting in the God who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness (Romans 4:5). Which is interesting because I wonder going back to our earlier discussion about the epidemic of blindness, whose vision of reality we really believe in most of the time. Which vision of reality are we resigned to live in? Are we so certain of our own vision that we trust it even more than what God sees? Are we so certain of our vision that we prefer the certainty of our inadequacies? Are we so certain of our own vision that we believe in the world's brokenness more than we do in the God who has reckoned it righteous and whole and beautiful and thriving? It's not that what we see and feel and sense is not real, but it's just not all that there is. Who we are in God's

eyes transcends, includes, and embraces who we might think we are on our best days and in our worst moments. What Genesis reminds us is that God gets the last word about us, not us, and that is good news.

In a world of the Big Sort and in this epidemic of blindness, the church has a unique place and unique task in our world. First to be a community that is more than a collection of our likeminded preferences. It is so easy and so tempting to want for nothing more than existence as a cluster of people like us. If we become just one more institution and religious group that has sifted ourselves based on our preferences for politics, for taste in people, for cultural preference, if we become nothing more than a community ripped straight marketing executive's playbook, then I wonder if we have largely failed at being the church. And if the headwinds of these social challenges, especially post-pandemic, are as challenging as David Brooks says they are, with fewer and fewer spaces and places where people can gather and feel seen, heard, respected, and understood, with an epidemic of blindness infecting all of us, with the number of people who say they have no close friends quadrupling in the last decade, with largescale distrust everywhere, I wonder if such circumstances are not made for communities whose mission is to foster belonging for all ages, all backgrounds, all cultures, all sexual orientations, saying to us all, 'you are baptized, therefore you belong; you trust God, therefore God sees you as righteous whether or not you or anyone else does; you are part of an imperfect community of imperfect people that have been gathered in this place to be a community where every person is seen, respected, heard, and understood, a community believes that our work is not done inside our walls, but spilling out in ways that our neighbors might flourish and see themselves as God sees them. To be part of a Christian community will not solve all our problems or even bring us all the fulfillment our hearts desire. In fact, it may cause us at times to be more critical, to demand more of ourselves and others, and to get frustrated with the lack of progress we often see and feel. Don't you remember Abram's complaint from Genesis, complaining of remaining childless in spite of God's promises, reminding God that he had no offspring to show for his life, impatient with God's promises not coming to fruition on his timetable.

But none of those things are the case in God's eyes. In God's eyes, Abram is seen, respected, heard, and understood, in God's eyes Abram not only belongs but is reckoned righteous, in God's eyes, Abram trusts in a vision of flourishing that he cannot yet see. In God's eyes, that is not just true for Abram, but is promised for all of us. In the chaos of this world and the chaos of our lives, we may often have trouble seeing it or sensing it or realizing it. But in God's eyes, it already is.