

## LOL (Lens of Love)

You've got to feel for Peter, who suffers the ultimate emotional whiplash in Matthew 16. In verse 17, Jesus says, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah. I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven."

Can you imagine the feeling? He gets to experience the ultimate high of being singled out by Jesus for special praise and honors. But *just six verses later*, while he is still basking in this unprecedented favor, Jesus brings him crashing back to earth with as severe a dressing down as Jesus ever gives anyone.

He accuses Peter of being a tool of Satan and a stumbling block to Jesus' mission. That seems a little harsh. I suspect Peter's intentions were good, that he was only trying to help, and that he was bewildered that Jesus would turn on him like that.

When Jesus began to talk about going to Jerusalem and undergoing great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and being killed, it probably sounded to Peter as though Jesus was having some kind of faith crisis. That he was afraid this good thing they had going was going to go horribly wrong.

Peter was trying to cheer Jesus up. Give him a pep talk to boost his confidence and assure him that things were nowhere near as bad as he was making out. Let him know that his disciples were behind him and were so committed to him that they would never allow such a horrible fate to befall him.

*"God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you."*

Peter misread Jesus' mood entirely. Jesus was not baring his soul about his fears and doubts; he was explaining what his mission was all about. In rejecting what Jesus said, Peter was rejecting the very mission that Jesus had come to fulfill.

Peter's incredibly fast fall from grace occurred because, while Peter recognized who Jesus was, he could not see what that meant. Even after all the time they had spent together, Peter still could not see life from Jesus' perspective.

In Peter's defense, it is one of our weaknesses as humans that we have great difficulty seeing things from another's perspective.

We tend to believe that we see things as they are, not recognizing that how we see things depends heavily on our own unique perspective.

George Carlin used to say, "Some people look at this and see a glass that is half full. Others look at it and see a glass that is half empty. I look at this and see a glass that's twice as big as it needs to be." How you view what is in the glass depends on your perspective.

When my parents were in Africa, they learned that some ethnic groups had nothing but disdain for democracy. When we hear that, we wonder what is wrong with them. How can they be so unenlightened as to reject the principle of one person, one vote? How can they be so stuck in their ways they can't see the value of one of America's bedrock principles?

Their reason for rejecting it, however, was simply a matter of perspective. Unlike our society, they revere the wisdom and experience of those who have lived the longest. Those are the people they feel should be making the decisions. They were bewildered why Americans would give those with little experience in life an equal vote in making governing decisions. From their perspective, democracy made no sense, and could only lead to disaster.

I remember, too, hearing about a missionary who taught an African tribe the story of David and Goliath. When he finished, he asked them what they thought the message of the story was.

He expected to hear them say that this story of little David, armed only with a sling shot, overcoming the huge, heavily armed and highly trained warrior, Goliath, showed how those who display strong faith in God can overcome tremendous odds.

Instead, the people all agreed that the lesson of the story was that God takes away the brains of our enemies. The missionary was baffled as to how they could be so dense. Until it was revealed to him that the warriors of this tribe happened to be deadly shots with a sling. They could not imagine why a soldier, armed with only a spear, a sword, and a shield would be so stupid as to challenge someone carrying a sling.

Perspective makes a huge difference. Jesus' most difficult task was getting people to see life from God's perspective, a perspective that is almost completely foreign to

human nature. He looked at life through a lens that opened up entirely new possibilities that simply were not available to those without the perspective.

He revealed what this new perspective was when he declared to his disciples in the Gospel of John, “a new command I give to you, that you love one another.” Love for one another was the new lens through which Jesus wanted his disciples to view the world. Doing so would change their lives and the world.

There is a wonderful quote about perspective that you’ve probably heard: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” What Jesus was saying was “if all you have is love, everything starts to look something you can shower with love.”

If you look through his ministry, so much of what Jesus taught was an attempt to bring listeners into this new, life-giving perspective.

In his Sermon on the Mount, he repeatedly used this formula: “You have heard it said, but I say.” “You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second.”

“You have heard it said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

When you look at life through the lens of love, everything looks different. *Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who mourn.* From a human perspective, those things don’t make any sense, but they do when viewed from God’s perspective.

The lens of love enabled Jesus to see a tax collector, a despised parasite of society, as a human being in need of God’s love and redemption. It caused Jesus to violate a religious rule against healing on the Sabbath, because, viewed through the lens of love, helping others is more important than observing rituals.

The lens of love shows us all kinds of things we have trouble seeing when viewed through the usual worldly lenses. It shows that the best thing to do with a multitude of hungry people is not to send them away to fend for themselves, but to feed them.

It shows us that vengeance is a fool's game, and that forgiveness is what puts us on the path to peace and happiness. That the way to get something worthwhile is to give something worthwhile. That the way to succeed is to sacrifice.

The lens of love causes us to see that judging others, satisfying as it seems, will only bring judgment upon ourselves. It shows us that amassing for ourselves riches on earth is not the way to peace and contentment.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus says that through the lens of love, we can see what is truly valuable and life-giving in the world. Those who are focused on nothing but profiting from this world, from getting ahead of others, from gaining power and status for themselves, risk losing their souls.

When we are stuck in our own prism of egocentricity, we get stuck on a whole lot of behaviors that do not bring life. Without Jesus bringing a new perspective to us, how would we ever see that new, abundant life is not a matter of trying to gain for ourselves more and more of what the world offers us, but is a matter of living in God's grace?

Jesus told the disciples about the mission that lay ahead of him. Viewed from the perspective of the world, what he was about to do made no sense. It certainly made no sense to Peter.

Why would Jesus, who had so much to offer the world, sacrifice himself so that others could live? Why would he put himself in harm's way just to make someone else's life easier? It makes sense only if you are looking through the lens of love.

We get ourselves into all kinds of trouble when we assume that our lens is the only correct one. That if others do not live up to our expectations as we see them through our perspective, it can only be because they are wrong, or weak, or evil. This view is reinforced when we surround ourselves with those who share our perspective.

The truth is that most of the time, what people do makes sense when viewed from their perspective. To those looking through a different lens, what I am doing may seem wrong, or weak, or evil.

As I said, we humans have great difficulty viewing life from any perspective other than our own.

I view the world from the point of view of a white male who is well into his sixties. From the perspective of a person who was born into an American family of Norwegian heritage, to loving parents who raised me in the faith and taught me to worship every Sunday.

From the perspective of being raised in suburban Minneapolis in a community with a large Jewish population. Of never having to go hungry a single day of my life, and of being basically healthy all my life.

From the perspective of an introvert who is probably overly sensitive, who is fascinated by the exchange of ideas, of philosophy and theology, and who has a passion for writing, and enjoys running, traveling, and the arts. From the perspective of a Biology major and an English major, who enjoyed careers in microbiology and freelance writing.

From the perspective of a husband, brother, father, and grandfather.

We tend to think that our perspective is the correct one, that most people share our perspective, and if they don't, they should. But the fact is not one person in this room, and probably no person in the entire world shares all of the perspective angles that I just described, and only scratched the surface.

My perspective is only one of millions of perspectives out there. How can I possibly imagine that mine is the correct one?

We may share many traits, experiences, feelings, and ideas. We may share many perspectives. But you cannot understand exactly what it is like to be me. Nor can I possibly understand exactly what it is like to be you. None of us shares completely another's perspective.

Knowing that, how can I possibly pretend to understand the perspective of a black man raised in the inner city who has been pulled over 35 times in his life by the police for "driving while being black?"

How can I possibly understand the perspective of someone raised in a dysfunctional family in a dying rural community, who has been without work for years, and is deeply in debt?

How can I possibly understand the perspective of someone who has been taught from birth to fear those who are different, to fear change?

How can I claim to understand the perspective of a Hmong woman who has seen so much death, has had her world totally turned upside down, and is now just trying to survive in a new and strange land?

A Jewish man who lost his entire family in the Holocaust? A Muslim woman who is confronted by glances of hatred and suspicion for how she dresses in public? A teenager who has grown up in a world of social media? A cynic who had a bad experience with religion as child and now wants nothing to do with it?

A war veteran who spent time on the front lines in Iraq and watched his buddy lose his leg to a land mine? A child in a Third World country who survives by picking through garbage. An old man who has lived on a farm all his life and never traveled outside the county?

How can I expect all these people to view life as I view it from my perspective? I can't. There is no way we can understand what it is like to be another person.

So how do we get along?

Jesus showed us. Whatever our own particular lens, the answer is to view everyone and everything through the lens given us by Jesus—the lens of love. Jesus spent a lifetime, a death, and a resurrection to bring us this lens of love.

When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail. When the only lens you have is love, everyone starts to look like someone who could use some of that love. That is the gift Jesus brought. It is a gift without price, and it is the key to the kingdom of God.