

A Tree? A Rope? A Spear?

You know the story: three blind mice encounter an elephant, and each determines to describe the elephant to the others. The first mouse encounters the elephant's leg, and says, "The elephant is like a tree!"

The second mouse encounters the elephant's tail, and says, "Oh, no! The elephant is much like a rope!"

Mouse #3 finds the elephant's tusk and says, "You both must be wrong! Indeed, the elephant is very much like a spear!"

Now, hold that image for a moment, and go to that place in your mind—your spirit—your soul—where you are able to hear the "still small voice" as it speaks through the written Word:

<p>I CORINTHIANS 13:8-12 (NRSV) <i>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child,</i></p>	<p><i>I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part (ek merous, "in fragments"); then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.</i></p>
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In the courtroom, witnesses solemnly swear to speak "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But, bottom line: we humans can't do it. When asked in court if we will speak the whole truth, we understand our limitations; and when we respond (properly) with a simple "I do," we understand that "So far as humanly possible" is implied in the "so help me God."

It's not that we're liars, but that we are humans. There is absolute truth, ultimate truth, but it belongs to God, not to humans. For us human beings, our comprehension of absolute truth is necessarily filtered by our limited minds. We humans have truth, but we have it in fragments; and, seldom are we able to put together the fragments into a consistent whole.

God has revealed the Truth in God's Word and made it visible in the Word-become-flesh. The Word is truth—absolute truth—but it has entered into the world of flesh, the world of relativity, so that the absolute truth of God appears in our relative world, and we mortals receive it in this-worldly, relative terms. Paul puts it this way: "our knowledge is fragmentary":

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12 NRSV).

The context is clear: it's not that we have some pieces of the transcendent jigsaw puzzle and will receive the additional pieces when Jesus returns. Rather, the piece that I have won't fit with the piece that you have; so, we can't make a coherent picture. Each piece is a treasured fragment of revealed divine truth, and we

give thanks for it; but each is this-worldly, indistinct, with fuzzy edges.

What I've just shared is my condensed version of the introduction of a new book by Dr. M. Eugene Boring. It's not yet published, and for the last few weeks I've been honored to be a part of a small group of his former students who have been asked to review the manuscript and to offer specific feedback. In the process, I have found new doorways into Scripture; but, like the already discovered doorways, what I see when I enter, is blurry.

Just outside Hannibal, Missouri is Garth Mansion, a beautiful ante-bellum mansion that's been restored as a bed-and-breakfast. Jo Lynn and I have stayed there a couple of times—once in a room where St. Mark slept—St. Mark Twain. He often stayed there when he returned to Hannibal. Some of the original glass is still in the window panes. You can see through them—the light shines through, as bright as through any modern window; but, you really can't recognize what you're seeing. You see movement and color, but can't tell if it's a man or a woman or an older child or teenager—or a shrub blowing in the wind. It's blurry and distorted.

This is Paul's metaphor for our understanding of truth. The images are reflections in a mirror, but not completely accurate. They're blurry and distorted. But getting a clear picture is more than a matter of getting additional pieces. New pieces would be as blurry as the ones we already have. To get the whole picture, we need a new kind of glass: a *kind* of perception only God has now.

In the story of three blind mice who've never seen an elephant, each offers a different perspective about what an elephant is like. What each says is true—partially true—a fragment of truth. And yet, the way to resolve their conflicting understandings of elephantness is not to add their perceptions together. "A Tree; A Rope; and A Spear" still don't describe an elephant.

So, Paul offers a different kind of understanding; an understanding that's more biblical, more Jewish. As presented in the New Testament, each understanding of the truth is valid and must be respected, but we do not and cannot know how to put the fragments together into one united whole. No human has ever beheld the total divine reality, and could not communicate it if he or she had.

As Paul struggles to communicate this profound truth to the ordinary human beings in the Roman church, he repeatedly makes side comments expressing the impossibility of simply declaring God's truth in simple, straightforward language:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (8:26)

But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) (3:5)

I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. (6:19)

Paul claims to speak the truth, but knows his finite mind cannot grasp or declare the wholeness of God's truth, which can be understood only in fragments (1 Cor 13:12). He understands that the truth of the transcendent world cannot be communicated in the language of this world (2 Cor 12:1-5).

Our human language is inadequate. Our human ability to comprehend is inadequate. And so, we tend to filter the Bible through the lenses of our culture, our language, and our experience. That's all we have; so, it's okay, as long as we recognize that my understanding is fragmentary, and likely won't fit totally with yours, and, therefore, I can't require you to relinquish your fragment and abide totally by mine.

So, how do we know whether we've 'got it right?'

We don't—completely. But our relationship with God is not determined on the basis of whether we get it right. That's why it's called "faith;" not knowledge. "Now I know in part—in fragments." And that's enough—for now—for this world.

God does not require that our faith be forced into any specific mold of human language and vocabulary; not even that of the witnesses; but through those same words—incomplete, blurry, fragmentary though they may be, God invites us to place our faith freely upon the one to whom their witness is directed.

Those three blind mice told the truth when they said an elephant is like a tree, and a rope, and a spear. They told the truth—kind of. But they didn't get it right.

And I tell you the truth, in my own fragmentary way, when I tell you what God is like. When I found God, God looked like—God felt like—the nail-scarred hands of Jesus. God looked like—God felt like—love.