

An enlarged and narrowed soul

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O Lord, the house of my soul is narrow; enlarge it that thou mayest enter in. It is ruinous, O repair it! It displeases thy sight; I confess it, I know. But who shall cleanse it, or to whom shall I cry but thee? Cleanse me from my secret faults, O Lord, and spare thy servant from strange sins. --*St. Augustine, [Confessions](#)*

I don't know what Augustine meant by "strange sins." Most days, what I need to be spared from are *ordinary* sins: pride, anger, lust, gluttony, greed, distraction, despair. That said, Augustine points to an essential paradox of our faith: I too need an "enlarged" soul--a wideness in heart and life to make more room for Christ and the gospel, for neighbors and enemies.

At the same time, Lent's approaching, reminding me that my soul is in disarray and needs deep cleaning. It needs a *narrower* focus, the "purity of heart" that Kierkegaard says is achieved by "willing one thing."

Is it sin that's at work maintaining the opposite of what I need--a broadened self and a narrower view of God? Why is it that in my preaching and teaching, and in my own discipleship, I constantly try to domesticate the divine according to the confines of my own awareness?

Too often I try to keep God at bay by way of what Walter Brueggemann calls the "small truths" that can be verified in my own small life. And I establish my limited experience as the first and final arbiter of what is "real." Who shall cleanse me? To whom can I cry, or to what can I turn?

When we embrace stories such as Elijah and Elisha or Jesus and the disciples on the mountain, we are forced to admit both that there is more going on than our cynicism would admit and also that we have much work to do to widen our souls and focus our attention. Maybe this is why the Bible (and the lectionary) won't let us ignore these episodes. It's hard enough to preach the more ordinary stories. Tackling these strange ones--proclaiming what cannot be explained but only told--both broadens and narrows our preaching, our view of the gospel and our own discipleship.

Pay attention to the dialectic between sight and blindness--between what can and can't be seen. Elisha stays with Elijah until he can see him no more. That vision provides him a broader perspective ("a double share of your spirit"), but a narrower focus to his own role as a prophet.

In the gospel narrative, the disciples see more than Jesus on the mountain--and thereby more of who and what he is than they knew before. The bright light of Jesus' transfiguration will not dispel all darkness; the theme of light and darkness continues through Lent and Holy Week. But "after the Son of Man has risen from the dead," they will continue to tell this strange story to broaden their claim of who Jesus is and to narrow their own sense of call and their appeal to others.

Not everyone is able and willing to see the bright light of the gospel. Even prophets and disciples cover their eyes. But those willing to look may see "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus," which sharpens the focus and broadens the soul.