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TWO SQUARE FEET
Sermon for Lent 2B—Mk 8:31-38
LPC, 3/1/15

Hagia Sophia was built in the year 537 as a Byzantine Orthodox Church in what was then Constantinople, now Istanbul. It is an engineering marvel, especially considering its great age, its monumental size (the Statue of Liberty could fit inside), and its location smack dab on top of a seismic fault. I saw a fascinating program about this on PBS Wednesday night.

When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque. Many gorgeous gilded mosaics of Christ and the saints were plastered over. The building was deconsecrated and became a museum in 1935. Since then, Hagia Sophia has been in an almost constant state of restoration. Restoration, however, is problematic, since the Islamic inscriptions that in many places cover the Christian mosaics are also historically, culturally and artistically valuable. Restorers, historians and architects must walk a very delicate line.

One of the researchers featured in the program I saw is using special instruments to detect metal beneath the plaster without disturbing the overlying artwork. Because the mosaics contained so much gold, this is an effective way of locating the mosaics and roughly mapping out what they may have looked like. Only problem is, the instrument can only read about two square feet at a time, and Hagia Sophia contains millions of square feet of wall space.

As I reflected on this, it occurred to me that this is an apt metaphor for how we human beings see things. Hagia Sophia is like the vast and wondrous universe in which we live (the original architects probably intended this comparison, incidentally.) What we apprehend of it is partial and fuzzy. What we can know helps us immensely, so there's no excuse for not trying to know whatever we can, but we must not mistake what we can see for the entirety, which is far beyond our ability to imagine.

This, I believe, is part of the distinction between “divine things” and “human things” that Jesus draws in today's Gospel lesson from Mark.

In this passage, Jesus reveals to his disciples for the first time that he is not just called to a ministry of teaching, preaching and healing. He is called to suffering, death and resurrection. This is more than Peter can get his head around – far beyond his ability to imagine.

Not long before this in Mark's narrative Peter has affirmed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Peter believes he has cracked the secret of the universe. He now knows the meaning of life, or thinks he knows it. The meaning of life is Jesus.

Good for Peter! He's right about this, you know, and Jesus tells him so. Peter probably feels a glow knowing that he's figured out life, the universe and everything.

But in reality he's only seen a part. He's only seen his two square feet. And the prospect of the death of the person he's just figured out is the secret of life doesn't fit into those two square feet. He is thinking like a human. He is not thinking of divine things.

Now we human beings can't help thinking like human beings, but if we want to follow Jesus, we have to open our hearts and minds to the idea that there is a larger universe out there than is suggested in our own square footage.

This is not a sermon just about being "open-minded." You may have heard quips like: "If a mind is too open, everything inside falls out." Just because we realize we don't and can't possibly understand everything doesn't mean we should never have a thought or an opinion or the strength of our own convictions. Realizing the limits of our sight should, however, prompt us as Christians to humility and generosity.

You may have some associations with humility and generosity. Let's see if this picture of searching for hidden artwork in Hagia Sophia can expand our understanding.

Humility is not a matter of being everyone else's doormat. A better metaphor for humility than a doormat is that instrument that can detect two square feet of artwork at a time among millions.

Rather than giving rise to self-abasement and despair, this type of humility promotes wonder and curiosity. In true humility, one doesn't say, "Oh I don't know anything. I can't do anything. Poor, poor me." Instead, one says, "I don't know everything. I wonder what new marvels may yet be revealed." And occasionally one says, "I'm sorry. I thought I knew everything and it turns out I don't. Forgive me."

Generosity is not just a matter of giving money to charity. Generosity is a state of mind that realizes that someone else may see a different two square feet than the two square feet that we see. It's not just a matter of giving someone some of your square footage. It's more a sense that if I join my square footage to yours we both will see twice as much.

Here's another observation. We are never, this side of heaven, going to be able to see more than the spiritual equivalent of two square feet of divine things: just like even with more advanced instruments we would never be able to see all the layers of beauty at Hagia Sophia. We probably couldn't stand it even if we were able. We'd probably have sensory overload like an autistic person and shut down.

So, we may never understand what Jesus calls "divine things." But we can, to use his words, "set our minds on them." We can see what we *can* see, know what we can know, and realize that there are more beautiful things going on beyond the surface than we can imagine. We can look with curiosity at what may be next revealed. We can respond with humility and generosity. We can take up our cross and follow Jesus not with resignation but with wonder, love and praise that the whole is much bigger than our own two square feet.