

NOT WHAT WE THINK

--A true story. Seated in my Harrisburg church office is a middle-aged couple who have come to do some counseling related to their marriage. Since they are members of the surrounding community, not members of my congregation, I know nothing about them. Initially, then, I have to ask the most obvious question of all: "What exactly brings you here?"

Like a track star exploding from the starting blocks, the woman blurts out, "I think he's having an affair!" There was to be no wasting of any time getting to the issue here.

Before I can say a thing, he, apparently also caught flat-footed by the quick accusation, answers, "Why would you ever think that?"

"Because you've been coming home later in the evening," she snaps back. "You're kind of sneaking around the house these days like you have some sort of secret life, and the other night, when I caught you in that telephone call, you became very edgy and nervous, looking like you have something to hide."

You could have heard a pin drop. What happens next, I could not have predicted.

He laughs. He roars with laughter. When he regains his composure, he says, "You're absolutely right. I have been coming home later in the evening. I have been sneaking around the house like I have some sort of secret life. And the other evening you did catch me in the middle of a telephone call that I didn't want you to overhear. But you're very wrong about the affair. You see, I've been behaving in all those strange ways because I've privately been making plans for us to go to Hawaii for our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary."

Oops. It wasn't at all what she had thought.

"I just wanted to surprise you," he says. He's the one who gets the surprise, as his very observant wife adds 2 plus 2 plus 2 and comes up with 9.

--You see, while the human mind truly is an extraordinary thing, in most of us it simply doesn't have the benefit of enough development to insure the fact that the information it processes and the conclusions that it reaches are real or true.

And that is made all the more difficult because, rarely, if ever, do we have all the facts that we need, and so we are almost always conducting our processing and arriving at our conclusions on the basis of partial information at best.

The result is that, when the human mind, as marvelous and powerful as it is, encounters a place where there is inadequate or imperfect information available, it fills the hole in with its own best guess--which is usually directly related, not to external reality, but to the guesser's own internal drama.

As in the case here, one may see things on the surface quite right but interpret them completely wrong. The accusing wife's interpretation tells us a lot about her inner life, and very little about what is actually going on

between the two of them. The real issue, it turns out, has nothing to do with his infidelity; it has to do with her insecurity.

As we've heard read this morning, the apostle Paul identifies these down sides to our thinking as our "see[ing] in a mirror, dimly," adding "for we know only in part" (1 Cor 13.12,9). My, that can be a problem, can't it? It's very difficult to establish ourselves in reality, when often reality is not exactly what we think.

--Have you heard the story about the little, old man (someone about my age) who pulls up at an intersection on a moped. Alongside him is a rich young fellow, comfortably seated in a sleek, shiny red, late-model sports car.

"What kind of car ya got there, sonny?" the old fellow inquires.

"This," comes the proud response, "is a Ferrari GTO. It cost a half million dollars. This car can do up to 325 miles an hour."

"Mind if I take a look inside?" asks the old guy. The light has yet to turn green, and the pleased owner gestures for him to go ahead, the curious fellow poking his head in through the window and looking around a bit.

Then, sliding back onto his humble ride, he says, "That's a pretty impressive vehicle alright, but I'll stick with my moped."

Just then the light changes, and the owner of the sports car decides to show the old man just what his Ferrari can do. He pushes the accelerator to the floor, and within seconds the speedometer reads 160 mph!

As he cruises on at this speed, quite unexpectedly, he notices a dot in his rear view mirror, something that, unbelievably, seems to be getting closer and closer. He slows down to get a better look when, suddenly--whoosh!--something whips by him going much faster.

"What on earth," says the guy to himself, "could be going faster than my GTO?"

He pushes harder on the gas, sending the sports car up to 200 mph, thinking that he will catch whatever or whomever it is that has passed him, when he once again comes up behind the old man on the moped.

Amazed that the klunker bike could pass his expensive sports car, the young fellow gives it even more gas, passing it at more than 250 mph. He is feeling pretty good until he notices in his rear view mirror that the old guy, again, is gaining on him, the moped inevitably bearing down on the Ferrari from behind.

Finally, the flabbergasted young fellow flags down the old man, and asks him, "Look, what can I do for you?!"

To which the old fellow responds, "Would you please unhook my suspenders from your side view mirror?"

Oops. That wasn't at all what he had thought.

--Both are cautionary tales. It is no simple thing not to be childish in our thinking.

In this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Paul observes the way it is for all of us: "When I was a child, I spoke like

a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child . . . .” (13.11a). Sadly, often that state of the child persists far too long into our advanced years, causing all sorts of stress and mayhem for us, and for those connected to us.

The apostle exhorts us towards the place where we “[become] an adult, [putting] an end to childish ways” (13.11b). It is a theme to which he returns in the following chapter, where he sounds an admonition and an encouragement. “Brothers and sisters,” he says, “do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults” (14.20).

Easier said than done. To be thinking as adults is to see something as it is, not as we have unconsciously projected ourselves onto it.

It is an important question to be asking ourselves, then, as we continue to walk this spiritual path of ours: How much attention are we paying to what and to how we are thinking?

What is the quality of our thinking?