

Paradox
Mark 8: 27-38

Jesus asks the disciples “ who do you think I am” and Peter at once answered “you are the Messiah”. Jesus says yes, yes, we all know that I am Messiah, but let’s not tell anybody else that for now. And, after arguing the point back and forth, Jesus tells Peter, “you are settling your mind not on the divine things, but on the human things.” In this statement Jesus reminds us of his dual identity of being both divine and human. Like Peter, we have not managed dualities in faith very well.

This summer I listened to an audiobook novel about South Sudan in 2002. That was the year that my refugee mentee, Nyakek, fled the South Sudan for Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya. The description of the novel sounded intriguing, but it should have included a disclaimer that the novel was written for evangelicals. This story centered on a woman physician from the US who was working with few medical supplies to care for injured and ill South Sudanese and an Arabic man turned Christian, who delivered medical supplies to the physician’s village. This woman worked tirelessly and mostly successfully to restore health to her villagers and she became guardian of 2 teens who lost their parents, but those acts of compassion were secondary to her identity in this novel. She was not a Christian and she fled to South Sudan to escape her evangelical family. While the war waged in South Sudan, the Arabic Christian focused his efforts on converting this woman physician. By the end of the novel, she accepted Jesus Christ as her personal lord and savior, she goes back to the US to set up a new life and “they all lived happily ever after”. Meanwhile, the bombs continued to fall in the South Sudan.

This summer in Pie Group, we reached the Reformation in *A Peoples History of Christianity*. Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. Those theses led to the reformation, but they were not the only players in the transformation of Roman Catholicism. The invention of the Guttenberg printing press had enormous influence. For the first time, Ideas became accessible to a lot of people. People could read about Luther’s ideas. Before printed words became available, people only known that salvation required good works or deeds or for the rich salvation could be earned through giving money to the church (indulgences). Their faith was “deed” based

and it left the church open to exploit those deeds and the money. Without access to the word of God, they were pawns of the Catholic Church. Their faith lacked any knowledge of who God was and could be for the people. Their faith lacked the words to communicate that love to one another. Once the words were delivered, we cannot overestimate their power.

Black slaves in the southern states were prohibited from learning to read. Death was the typical punishment for blacks who could read, but that didn't stop some slaves from learning to read. The introduction of words and ideas to the black slave community was liberating, because the wrongs of their circumstances were confirmed and possibilities for escape opened up. Words draw us in with a powerful force. So, in the 16th century the access to both hear and read the Bible, which had never been made available to the common folks, must have been extraordinarily enlightening.

The ability to hear the word was transforming in itself, but equally so were the actual words they heard. Martin Luther's words, which are tattooed on the backs of every student who ever graduated from a Norwegian Lutheran college read, "we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone". Luther's conviction that salvation was not based on the accumulation of deeds to the church, but on faith in God reformed the practice of faith for people in northern Europe. Deeds slowly and gradually gave way to creeds.

The novel of South Sudan with its Muslim-turned-Christian and the woman physician is a reminder that "creeds" still define faith for many Christians and deeds have been left out of their expression of Christ's love.

In the 21st century, dualism has been lost. Some people see the divinity of Jesus, but not the servanthood of Jesus and this kind of faith which consists solely of words becomes very self-centered faith. Believing the creeds becomes a means of salvation. Some people see the servanthood of Jesus and miss his divinity and that single-minded faith leads to cynicism and hopelessness (that tends to be me). Consequently, some people think that a new reformation is needed – not because Luther was wrong, but because his way of being faithful has drifted out of balance. Diana Butler Bass, author of *A People's History of Christianity* says that contemporary people are looking for experiences and communities in which

words and actions interweave, where Christianity is both proclaimed and embodied.

Balance is a good way of looking at how we meaningfully encounter the divinity and humanness, the words and servanthood of Jesus. But the loss of balance is hard to recognize. Peter didn't realize that he lost sight of the duality of Jesus. So rather than balance I'm going to suggest another way of looking at dualism: paradox.

For me to understand paradox, I had to think about paradoxes I have encountered. In recent years, I've become hooked on knitting. In order to be a good knitter you have to be a better unknitter (or ripper). So the art of knitting lays in the art of unknitting. You have to be good at making stitches and better at unmaking stitches. These opposite acts are essential together. They lead to the same goal. I'm gradually becoming used to the idea that ripping is just as much a process of knitting as knitting is. Two opposites work together toward a common goal.

I learn new stitches and techniques by watching YouTube videos. For one project I had to learn a particularly difficult pair of stitches; M1L and M1R. The woman demonstrating the stitches said "if it seems easy to do, you are probably doing it wrong".

When I taught the senior seminar course for Biochemistry and Biology students – actually I still do – the faculty in the seminar often had long discussions after the students left the classroom. Each week 1 or 2 students would present a research paper. This past year, we focused both semesters on Covid. In these post-class discussions we often wondered what the intellectual limit is for students who are 21 years old. Most presentations sound like book reports – just the facts ma'am – rather than a critical analysis of the research paper they are reporting on. The students at 21 with limited exposure to science see the trees and the trees can indeed be overwhelming, but they cannot yet see the forest – what does it all mean? It gradually dawned on me from watching the students develop a way of thinking is that science is seeing the forest and the trees simultaneously. Two opposites – big picture and minutia - work together toward a common goal. Seeing this duality simultaneously is hard, but it leads to those ah-ha moments.

Paradoxes, at their best, create tension between the two opposite things and where that tension is palpable, that is where truth can be found. Seeing the forest alone fails to help us understand how things work. Seeing trees alone fails to help us understand why things must work that way. We need both forest and trees together. And it is a rare event when the tension between forest and trees is perfect.

Martin Luther provided a paradox for Christian faith:

A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none, and . . .

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Luther provided clues to his confusing paradox. He saw limitations to the spoken words that were still quite new to the common folk. Words provide ways of thinking, but “God must speak to your heart”. So nobody can dictate to us the nature of God in our hearts, that is determined by God alone.

Faith expressed in this paradox is both deeply personal (only God can speak to our hearts) and communal (yet we are servants to all). Throughout history, it seems that we have been trying to minimize tension between these two realms of faith by choosing either the personal or the communal, but not both. So, if there is to be a new reformation we should be searching for the tension between the personal and communal, because that is where faith works. “If it seems easy to do, you are probably doing it wrong”.

Benediction:

We cannot fully understand the holiness of Jesus with words alone and we cannot fully understand the servanthood of Jesus through actions alone. Words of faith and actions of faith co-exist in tension. This gathering here breathes life into that tension. Thank you and thank God.

