

Faith and Paradox

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We find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers. —from “The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity”

The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we haven't the courage to live with uncertainty. —William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Isaiah 55:6-9

It was the English writer, John Middleton Murry, who once wrote that “it is better to be whole than to be good.” I think he was talking about the danger of a worldview in which there is no ambiguity, no questions, no doubt—everything is black or white, right or wrong, a matter of following a clear rule book. And there's a difference between this kind of faith and one which embraces paradox and leads to true wholeness. (A paradox is when two contradictory statements are true.)

As human beings, part of our brains (the left part) seems to be wired in an “either/or” manner. We need this part for survival. It organizes and helps us focus and make decisions. But modern Western culture and religion has taken this a step further and has come to be totally dominated by this left side of the brain, particularly after the Enlightenment and the advent of the scientific method. In our current culture we dissect, break things down into parts and analyze to find the truth. Now, this has led to some very important discoveries. However, *existence itself* is characterized by paradox. It is “both/and.” A religion for the 21st century will be able to hold the “both/and” together in the same hands. And a religion for the 21st century will contain both the worldly and the mystical, both the scientific and the poetic.

It was Einstein who said, “Science without religion is lame; Religion without science is blind.” And the mystics say that because reality is paradoxical—ultimately undivided—that non-dual thinking is the highest level of consciousness.

Instead, in our culture we tend to objectify paradoxes into dogmatic statements. Faith has become for the vast majority of the church something we mentally agree to instead of an inner experience of mystery. We are taught that God, the I Am, the Unnamable, whose thoughts and words are utterly beyond human thoughts and words, whose wisdom is beyond comprehension, is a great Mystery, *and yet we hate mystery!* I was reminded of another great quote from Albert Einstein, a man of worldly spirituality:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious...[The one] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.

A faith with too much certainty, without mystery, it seems to me, is not much of a faith at all and leads to despair, to “a snuffed out candle.”

Fundamentalism, a modern phenomenon, embodies this incapacity to deal with paradox. But as Soren Kierkegaard said so well, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a *reality to be experienced* (or a *mystery to be lived*).”

Look, this is not an “anti-thinking” sermon. But good, logical thinking about the truth should never be a substitute to *experiencing* the Truth. Clear thinking should always lead us to paradox, to mystery. Likewise religion should always lead us to spiritual experience. And a religion that doesn’t do this isn’t worth very much.

It is said that the larger the island of knowledge the longer the shoreline of wonder. We need to keep track of the shoreline, the wonder, that vast, immense and unfathomable mystery at the depth of all being.

For Jesus, the center of my own tradition, the primary purpose of the sacred writings, laws and traditions was not to give answers, but to help people wake up and become aware, alive to the presence of God. And for him, this was a lifelong endeavor. He was particularly hard on those who thought they were good, they knew it all, that they had “arrived.” This reminds me of a great comment by the poet, Maya Angelou. She said,

When people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians, my first response is the question, “Really—Already?” It seems to me it is a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian.

It seems to me that spiritual life is a journey, not a destination, where we continually search and seek and grow. None of us has “arrived.” The journey never stops.

I know, there are some folks who don’t want to hear that their spiritual journey has only just begun. They want it over with. Searching and seeking is hard work. In a progressive congregation, everyone has just begun. We’re all beginners.

I love how Anne Lamott put it when she wrote,

The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty. You can tell you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do. The first holy truth in God 101 is that men and women of true faith have always had to accept the mystery of God’s identity and love and ways. I hate that, but it’s the truth.

Former director of The Center for Progressive Christianity, Jim Adams, an acquaintance of mine, wrote,

According to the gospels, Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a straight question. Instead he responded with another question or told a puzzling story. At the risk of disappointing his questioners, Jesus put them in a position of having to think for themselves...Jesus would not provide absolute answers because answers, by providing

false confidence and security, become barriers to an awareness of God. Answers become substitutes for God.

True faith, mature faith, in Parker Palmer's words, is "living the contradictions." He wrote,

Spiritual truth will often seem self-contradictory when judged by the logic of the world. Where that logic wants to separate and divide, the spiritual eye looks for what Merton called life's "hidden wholeness," the underlying unity of all things.

It is better to be whole than good. It is better to be whole than to pretend to have all the answers.

And so the spiritual life—the life of faith—is about experiencing the opposites held together *within oneself*. It's about accepting and embracing those opposites. It's about giving up one's superiority system (we all have a superiority system), giving up our own good-ness and recognize it's better to be whole. It's about seeing an *inherent* goodness (not one we earn) the image of God within, yet also see our limitedness and weakness. As Paul paradoxically said, it is in our weakness that we are strong. This reminds me of something that the great psychotherapist, Carl Rogers, once said:

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

And so we care deeply about this world, about justice. And yet when we are able to accept things, embrace things *as they are* without condition—the whole world and not just parts—we are able to care even more profoundly and deeply.

Living and loving the contradictions is just what Jesus did, it seems to me. For example, true abundance is found in a possession-less life of simplicity. Jesus said, "The one who seeks to save one's life shall lose it, but the one who loses one's life shall find it."

Jesus lived in a realm in which "the last will be first and first will be last," or in John Dominic Crossan's paraphrase, "The somebodies will be nobodies, and the nobodies will be somebodies."

To be a somebody, one must first become a nobody.
To be a success, one must first become a failure.
To be whole, one must first become broken.
To ascend, one must descend.

Again, Parker Palmer said it well:

To be saved, to be made whole, is to realize that we are in the contradictions, that the contradictions are in us, and that all of it is held together by a "hidden wholeness."

And what better place to experience and embrace life's contradictions than in a community?

Someone once said, "You don't think your way into a new kind of living, you live your way into a new kind of thinking." That's as good of a reason to be part of a church as I have ever heard: To live your way into a new kind of thinking.

And so it is not surprising that many feel called to a spiritual community, since it is here that we experience the paradox of faith. It is here that we are fully accepted, yet challenged to change. It is here that we are forgiven, yet also forgive. William Johnston, in his book, *Christian Zen*, wrote “faith is the breakthrough into that deep realm of the soul which accepts paradox...with humility.” What better place to accept paradox with humility than in a community? With all these messy, demanding, yet rewarding relationships?

We see this in Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served. In the giving one receives. Sometimes, the best remedy for one’s own pain often is to identify with the pain of others.

And now, we are getting at the very both/and nature of God:

God, who is separate and distinct, boundless and eternal;
Yet God who is inseparable from all that is,
 who is made flesh and temporal at every moment,
 who binds Herself willingly, making the suffering of others Her own.

God, who is transcendent, beyond all things,
Yet God who is imminent and within all things.

God, in whom there is perfect being;
Yet God who is continually becoming.

God, in whom there is a deep calm, stillness and rest;
Yet God, in whom there is a restless activity,
 a creative, transforming urge,
 a ceaseless and furious striving.

With God, it is not either one aspect or another; it is “both/and.” When we experience God’s presence—and we all experience God’s presence continually as sure as we taste the air that we breathe—one aspect will lead to the other.

Friends, let us together discover a faith in which
 we accept paradox with humility,
 we realize it is better to be whole than to be good,
 we are saved when we are living in contradictions,
 we lose our life in order to find it.

May the Sacred Reality lend us the secrets of life
 to be *and* to become,
 to surrender *and* to strive.

May we know ourselves to be
 accepted just as we are
 and yet called continually to change.

South American writer, Eduardo Galeano, wrote:

They gave him a seashell: “So you’ll learn to love the water.”

*They opened a cage and let a bird go free: “So you’ll learn to love the air.”
They gave him a geranium: “So you’ll learn to love the earth.”
And they gave him a little bottle sealed up tight.
“Don’t ever, ever open it. So you’ll learn to love mystery.”*

Friends, let us learn to love mystery, love the questions, that we may find our true hope and faith.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)