

Upside, downside, inside out

Christ the King Sunday Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43 Rev J Shannon

I call this Paradox Sunday because this is the Sunday where all the things we've been taught, and all the things we believe and all the things we want— all come crashing together. We come to worship a man who is not a man, who died but it not dead for a God who is only one but 3. We will drink his blood which is not blood and eat his flesh which is not flesh and be joined as one body created from very different individuals.

Thomas Merton was a trappiest monk. He described life as being in the belly of paradox.

Learning to live the tensions of opposites is one of the great skills of life. Things that appear to be opposite or even contradictory, can expand us. Being comfortable with holding all these things true is one of the "Great habits of the Heart"¹. It is not just to survive but to thrive. That sounds weird, doesn't it?

Last month I came back from Sydney with a washing machine of emotions. I was so warmly greeted and I realised how much I loved those I once served – and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I could spend my time feeling guilty or accepting that paradox has to be OK in order to let me sleep at night.

How many of us lie in bed at night and think, I love my adult children and I am grateful they have gone home today. Oh, I am a terrible parent...but then I am a good self-carer. Christmas is coming. We might all be having these thoughts!

EB White (one of my heroes – he wrote Charlotte's Web) once said,

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it to be merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. That makes it hard to plan the day.

We know war is wrong. We know hate is wrong but we also know there are JUST wars – and try as we might, we may not be able to love Putin into peace. St John of the Cross once wrote,

You might quiet the whole world for a second if you pray
And if you love,
if you really love
our guns will wilt.

¹ Parker J Palmer, in his teaching at the Centre for Courage and Renewal

We believe that – even though there is a part of us that doesn't. We may even think if we could just do it well enough!! Maybe. Just as we know we should be kind and considerate and that, sometimes, the church is guilty of being too kind and too considerate which is what allows bad behaviour to happen. We make nice.

A healthy spiritual life – and a healthy faith allows room for both AND. It should not be a faith of scarcity but rather one with room for others, other beliefs, other truths.

It is too easy to become binary – maybe it's in our DNA. We've been taught 'fight or flight' and believe me, I'm good at the flight part. This kind of thinking limits our creativity and thus limits our possibilities.

The promise of paradox is that opposites like order and disorder can coexist in our lives. But it can only happen if we replace an either/or with a both/ and². Many as time as a teacher, I had to learn to let chaos reign because the kids would surprise me with their genius outcomes. (Control them and I limited possibilities.)

To do this, we have to learn to let go. Letting go is basic to almost all faiths. Lighten up. Don't hold things so tightly. Buddhism asks us to learn to empty ourselves. So too in Christianity: 'see how the Lilley grows, says Jesus – here it is:

Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

²⁷ "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. ²⁸ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!³

At the heart of letting go is faith and trust.⁴ The next line in the Luke reading is about whether we trust God to know what we might need. Surely, in some way, this is foolish. If we live in this world without suspicion then people will take advantage of us. Trust them becomes in itself untrustworthy. And yet I have met people who live in a world of total trust – and as a result, have changed people around them. We have to trust to be trusted.

Jesus loved to throw up paradoxes to confound and enlighten his listeners: Teaching that conflict or holding things too tightly was counter-productive to true freedom and enlightenment. "He who seeks his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life shall find it."

² Parker Palmer says being able to embrace this can make our lives larger and filled with light.

³ Luke 12:26-28

⁴ Parker J Palmer, The Promise of Paradox

Like the Pharisees clinging tightly to tradition and law, so tightly they could almost lose their humanity. Passionate conservative beliefs can counteract basic tenants like, love thy neighbour or blessed are the poor. There are churches so willing to condemn, they forget to forgive. ‘Those who seek well-being and grasp for more than their share, will find life pinched and fearful.’⁵ says Palmer.

They will live anxiously, wanting more and fearing loss. But those who reach out know that true abundance is not in hoarding but in community. Having been there for others, they have reason to believe that others will be there for them.

We have systems and institutions that have taught us binary thinking. It is hard to break free. In academia and journalism, we are trained to remove ourselves from the story and yet, we are never truly removed. Stories impact on us – and truthfully, we impact on the stories. We dismiss these contradictions. We smooth over opposing views but that doesn’t make them go away. Instead of either/or – including them with an AND can lead to more honest conversations, deeper relations and a deeper, more robust faith.⁶

We all know the Christmas story as acted out in our childhood plays bears little resemblance to the Bible texts – but we include it; embrace it and more to the point, share it as a common denominator. Beautiful layers of un-text related traditions...It is an AND.

Life is a paradox. When we finally grow up and develop some wisdom, our bodies begin to tell us our days are numbered.⁷ The more we know, the more skilled we are, the less we are able to do. If we live in an AND world, we will use that wisdom AND manage our energies and set our productivity within reason. (A lesson I am learning – slowly)

Here I turn back to Parker Palmer. He says thinking in terms of AND turns the whole thought process on its head. It takes the world’s logic of scarcity and turns it upside down. Grasping brings less. Letting go brings more. What God wants from our fear of scarcity or missing out is not wealth but spiritual insight. That’s something money can’t buy. You can’t stockpile faith. Money can’t buy identity. Often people with the least are those who trust the most. They are the last whom the Gospel makes first.

When we read today’s readings, first we have the promise of salvation, then we have the crucifixion AND we have the unexpected, least likely, advocate speak up to save

⁵ IBID

⁶ A great conversation might begin with “I want to believe in Jesus AND I am a scientist...”

⁷ Based on a sermon from Rev Dr Barbara Coeyman, UU Church in Reston

Jesus. Hope, disappointment, mercy, fear, love and selflessness – all coexist in this upside-down world. We can rest and grow in AND.

So I will finish with a line from our readings today:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col1:19-20)

That is a beautiful paradox. Amen