

September 14, 2014

### ***Being Human: Living in a World of Paradox***

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with someone whose faith I admire very much. It was one of those blue sky, big-picture conversations; we were talking about the purpose of religion, what difference it makes in people's lives, *our* lives, to be Christian. "Don't you think," she said, "that religion is the thing that answers our big questions, like what a moral life looks like? Don't you think that it's our faith that tells us how to know what is right and wrong?" (I think she put this in the form of a question because I'm a pastor and I'm supposed to know the answers to questions like this.) And so I answered her with some brilliant, theologically insightful thought, like, "I guess so." But I've been thinking about that conversation ever since.

A lot of people think that the main point of religion is to tell us what it means to live a "good" life--good enough to get by God's judgment, or to give us answers about what's right and wrong in a world that has a lot of gray area. I think that's often how we read the Bible: we're looking, if not for rules, then at least for guidelines about how to be a good person, how to evaluate what is right and wrong—in ourselves and in other people, other points of view. And there are some answers about that in the Bible and in our Christian tradition. There's the Ten Commandments, and Jesus' version of the Golden Rule—love your neighbor as yourself. We have stories of Jesus that give us a life to model ours on.

But sometimes the answers are not so clear, even from the Bible. The Bible is not a tidy, systematic guidebook, or even one coherent story written by someone with final authority. God did not write the Bible. People did. Its words are inspired, but they're not dictated. The Bible is a collection of stories told from many perspectives—not all of them God's. It shows us life from a lot of different angles. There's not just one authorized biography of Jesus' life; there are four gospels—written by four different people who didn't all remember the same things or understand them the same way. There are stories about God that paint a picture of a vengeful and jealous and angry deity and some that tell of a God who is forgiving and kind, "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

So the idea of diversity, differences in perspective, is built into our tradition. We're *supposed to be* not quite certain about how God looks at things. Finding and making the road that will lead us toward being more fully alive is *our work*. We follow someone, but we get only glimpses. Sometimes the map has gaps in it. We have to figure out for ourselves where to take the next step, which is the path that will lead to life and where there might be dangerous cliffs ahead.

We read today a second account of creation—slightly different from the one in which God took seven days to complete the picture. This story, almost certainly written by a different writer, tells us it happened in just one day. It skips ahead to the most important part for the storyteller—the part about *us*, the creation of woman and man. God created Adam and Eve and put them in a beautiful garden, the story says, at the very center of the earth, at the source of four rivers that brought water to sustain life to the rest of the world. The garden was full of plants and vines and flowers and fruits and vegetables, but most importantly, at its center were two trees: one was called the tree of life and the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "Eat as much as

you want of everything,” God said to the humans; “I made all of this for you to enjoy. Just one thing is off limits. Do not eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It’s poison; it will kill you.”

You know the rest of the story. A snake, moment of temptation too great to resist; in spite of everything else they had available to them, Adam and Eve had to try the one fruit that had been set aside for God’s exclusive use. They ate, they “sinned”, and they were sent out of the beautiful garden where life would have been easy forever. Mostly our tradition has heard this as a story about disobedience; Adam and Eve’s, and therefore all people’s inability to obey God because of this persistent streak of evil that runs through all of us. Sort of like a design flaw in creation. We would have demanded a recall if it had been cars instead of humans.

But let’s look closer at this story. There were two trees in the garden. One of them, the Tree of Life, was fine, healthy, full of fruit. “Eat all you want,” God said. “What’s mine is yours.” It was only the other tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that God warned them to stay away from. Why? Wouldn’t it be helpful to have that knowledge? A good thing for us to know, with certainty, how to judge what is right and wrong? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to get from our God, from our religion?

Maybe it’s not. Maybe God knew that eating that fruit, exercising their judgment about what was good and bad, feeling certain enough to know not only for themselves but for other people too, was the worst mess Adam and Eve could have gotten themselves into. Maybe God knew that once humans started judging right and wrong, it wouldn’t take long before they started to say this person is good and deserves to live, and that tribe deserves to die. That this land is good for us, but that river is all right to exploit. I think God knew that once we start naming the bad guys, persecution and violence are not far behind; and as soon as we are clear that we are the good guys, we begin to live in a world of illusion and prejudice. Maybe God knew already that once we start down that road of judging one another, or insisting that we have the answers about how God will judge, thinking that we own the truth *is* like poison to us. That our own certainty will kill us.

Without a doubt, we live in a world where both evil and good exist. Where things are broken and unlovely, where people both delight and disappoint us. God seems to be not as surprised about this as we are. God seems perfectly willing to live with us even though we are a mass of contradictions, even though we can’t quite make ourselves worthy or cleanse the world of all the bad stuff. And if God is willing to live with this ambiguity, then perhaps we who are made in God’s image must learn to live in the midst of it too.

Probably you already know that a group of people from this church and a few other churches go to the Elmwood Correctional Facility, part of the Santa Clara County jail system, many weeks during the year—and in fact they are there this weekend—to offer inmates an opportunity to think and talk about their souls and to express their spirituality through art. It really is a transformative ministry—both for the inmates and for the people who go there. It has changed their lives, offered them hope, inspired the inmates to connect their faith with the reality of their lives. I asked one of the volunteers why she thought this work matters so much to the inmates. She answered immediately. “It’s because we look at them differently than other people do,” she

said. “Just by being there, we are saying to them, ‘You are not the worst thing you have ever done. You’re more than that.’” I’m pretty sure this is what God says to us, too. I’m pretty sure that living in the image of God is saying this to one another.

Just like that story of Adam and Eve, we are living in a garden that invites us to choose, every day. The choice is not so much about right and wrong, good or evil. It’s about whether to eat from the Tree of Life—the tree that brings more —authorizes us to judge and misjudge. It is our choice.

We can use our intelligence to be creative and compassionate, or to judge and accuse.

We can use our physical strength to serve or to keep plundering the earth for what we want and need.

We can use our faith as a claim to certainty, or as a way of trusting that all shall be well, even when don’t know for sure.

And all the time, that tree of life is right there, offering in its fruit more aliveness, more joy, more forgiveness. A gradual opening of the eyes of love and compassion--the same eyes that God sees all of creation with. “Come and eat,” God says. “Even in your *un*-certainty, this is the fruit that will nourish you for the journey.”