

A Complicated God

Earlier this week someone came in to see me, scratching their head, and after talking about pleasantries for a bit, launched into her sense of complete and utter frustration with our faith.

A lifelong Episcopalian, a regular attendee at one of our sister churches, this gal was having a hard time.

Why, she wants to know, does Jesus gather up drunks and hookers and loan sharks, and then turns around as he's wrapping up the sermon on the mount and says: "Be perfect, like your Father in heaven is perfect."

How do you say a thing like this to a crowd like that?

How is it that Jesus in one breath stands before us last week and says: "Peace be with you," but two weeks ago goes on about not bringing peace but a sword; not family harmony but family discord?

How do we approach a God who offers the joys of eternal life to the whole world (as in "when I am raised up I will draw the whole world to myself"), but who also warns over and over again of the fires of hell, of seeking out the narrow gate, and yes, of being perfect like our Father in heaven is perfect?

How do we wrap our heads around this Jesus who teaches to thousands openly and in public, yet does so in parables, so that by hearing, they might not understand, and by seeing, they might still be blind?

These questions come home to roost today because our lessons shine the spotlight on two of the biggest contradictions of the whole Bible: Paul and Peter.

Talk about contradictions!

Peter, the first of the apostles, the rock on whom the church is built, is a dense career fisherman who no doubt plays poker on Friday nights, smokes cigars and curses like a sailor.

He is the one who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, but who also can't fathom a suffering Messiah: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus says to his number 1 pick....

Peter's haplessness is on display when Jesus invites Peter to walk on the water, only to sink into the depths when fear replaces faith.

He falls asleep in the garden while Jesus sweats blood: "Can't you wait one hour with me?" Jesus asks.

It is Peter's sword that cuts off the guard's ear when they came to arrest Jesus.

"Put it away!" Jesus scolds.

"If you live by the sword, you'll die by it too."

Even when the women bring news of the empty tomb, of seeing the risen Lord, according to Peter it is nonsense.

Except, that as the first called by Jesus, he also keeps encountering life that is not so easy to explain.

He is there, even if for a moment, standing on the water with Jesus.

He is there when Jesus takes the dead little girl by the hand: "Talitha cum, little girl, I say to you, get up."

He is there on the mountaintop when Jesus is stunningly transfigured.

The contradictions that flow out of Paul are even greater.

He's the zealous defender of the law; on a mission from God, he thinks, to arrest and/or kill the blasphemous followers of that great pretender, Jesus, who is, at long last dead; buried in the grave; a problem no longer.

Knocked to his backside, blinded by a light he never sees coming, Paul becomes the very last of the apostles; but the one about whom we know more than any other apostle; the one whose letters lay a foundation for the faith beyond Israel, the one who is second only to Jesus in teaching what it is that the Kingdom of God means.

As Fred Beuchner puts it:

"He wasn't much to look at.

Bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose.

Years after his death that's the way the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla describes him, and Paul himself quotes somebody who had actually seen him:

"His letters are strong, but his bodily presence is weak" (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Talk about contradictions!

Rescued from persecuting the Living God, Paul enters a life that is full of pain and misery.

"Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one;" he writes.

"Three times I have been beaten with rods.

Once I was stoned.

Three times I have been shipwrecked.

A night and a day I have been adrift at sea.

In danger from rivers ... robbers ... my own people ... Gentiles.

In toil and hardship, in hunger and thirst ... in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

He also is sick off and on all his life and speaks of a "thorn in the flesh" that God gives him "to keep me from being too elated" (2 Corinthians 12: 7).

Epilepsy?

Hysteria?

Who knows?

The wonder of it is that he was able to get around at all." F. Beuchner (paraphrased)

After his stunning encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul is like a man staggering away from a car wreck; like one wandering away from the effects of an earthquake: he's just trying to hang on, just trying to ride it through, to find some place to plant his feet." Willimon, *Conversations with Barth*, 219.

Was he born or did he die on that road to Damascus? *Id.*

Perhaps he did both.

Peter and Paul both come to see that when we are face to face with the resurrected Lord, we don't get to keep our footing.

We don't get a world that's neat and sensible: what we get is a sending out – "Go, as the Father has sent me, so I send you!"

"The Christian faith is not well suited for safe harbors and island fortresses.

It has a way of stagnating when the water gets too calm or placid.

Jesus is always "going on before us," beckoning us, like God beckoned Abraham, into new and unknown territory.

The religion of the Pharisees was a sure thing with little risk.

They knew exactly what they needed to be "good people".

But Jesus slapped their dead religion, calling them as cold as tombs.

The Pharisees were so bound to the comfortable security of their old-time religion that they were blind to the miracle of the Savior coming into their midst.

As Christians, we are free to risk, ask questions, doubt, try bold things because we are secure in the love which does not let us go, the love of the God who is always in front of us, leading us on.

Part of maturity is learning to live without firm assurances, without all our questions answered, without everything nailed down.

That's why faith is best defined not as firm belief but as trust." Willimon, *The Gospel For Those Who Have Everything*.

I think what the gal who came to see me last week longed for was some kind of gift wrapped faith: one that doesn't have contradictions; one that doesn't boil over with paradox; one you can hold and explain and control.

But what Peter comes to see at that beachside barbecue, what Paul comes to hear as he sits in three days of darkness, is that the Living God is not something that we can gift-wrap or explain or grasp.

It is God who explains us; it is God who grasps us.

I got an email from my buddy Glenn Woo this week.

Here is what it said:

An elderly Texan had a massive heart attack and the family drove him to the emergency room.

After a while the ER doctor appeared wearing a long face.

"I'm afraid Grandpa is brain-dead, but his heart is still beating."

"Oh, Dear God," cried his wife, "We've never had a liberal in the family before!"

As I was about to retaliate and forward to Glenn the link entitled Crazy Things Said By Right Wing Nut Jobs, that still small voice whispered in my ear that we need to aim higher.

These days, we Christians don't have the luxury of dividing into left verses right, liberal verses conservative.

We live in pagan times when consumerism and porn and power and celebrity and most of all money are the gods of the realm.

And just as the true God can use ex-murderers like Paul; just as God can stiffen the spine of the fainthearted like Peter, so God intends to use all of his people, regardless of background, regardless of political persuasion, to continue to plant the subversive garden that is the kingdom of God right here, in the midst of this world.

It's enough to keep the steadiest person off balance.

And that is how it should be.

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but for those who are being saved, for us, it is the power of God.

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart."

Where is the sage?

Where is the scribe?

Where is the debater of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since the world, in the wisdom of God, did not recognize God by means of wisdom, it has pleased God to save those who believe by the folly of preaching.

For the Jews demand signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and folly for the Gentiles, but for those who are called, Jews as well as Greeks, it is Christ who is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

+amen