

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Paradox

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“*Simul Justus et peccator*,” at the same time justified and sinner, saint and sinner. Decent paradox, and one you’re likely familiar with. Our faith contains a lot of paradoxes when you think about it: Jesus is fully God **AND** fully human; God is One **AND** God is Three; the kingdom of God is coming **AND** it is already here. That’s just a few of the paradoxes of our theology, but what about the teachings of Jesus? They’re full of paradoxes too: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”¹ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”² Even Paul reported Jesus teaching him that “power is made perfect in weakness.”³

Given how many paradoxes we find in our theology, in Scripture, and in our faith, it’s easy to conclude that paradox must be important. But why? Why is it so important for living how we were created to live that we be exposed to contradictory thought? Why does it seem so important to God to safe-guard us against overly-simple, black-and-white thinking? Why does Jesus force his followers to wrestle with the tension of paradox so regularly in his teachings?

What possible purpose for paradox could there be? Well, at the most basic level it is an acknowledgement of the messiness of our reality. One of the first things Luther taught about being a theologian of a cross is that such a theologian always calls a thing what it is. And let’s be honest, there are a lot of paradoxes in the world. There is a lot of “this is true...**and** this is true too” in the world, though we seem to generally prefer to ignore such complexity. We don’t like the tension caused by paradox, but perhaps we need it.

Paradox also forces us to slow down and truly **think** about what we’re dealing with. Paradoxes are great at stopping our brains from following the well-worn

¹ Matthew 10:39 (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 20:16

³ 2 Corinthians 12:9b

paths of habitual thought. And to truly engage with paradox will force us into deeper reflection and contemplation. What can it possibly mean that I am both saint and sinner? It certainly seems to be true that we can be both of those things...it is a tense reality that we need to accept. But given that, what might reflecting on this hard reality teach me about myself? About my neighbor? About creation? About God?

Acknowledgment of reality and invitation to mirror-work; we find both of these reasons for paradox in our Gospel reading from today, centered in the householder's reply: "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them."⁴ Wrestling with the tension that comes from paradox forces us to slow down and really examine what it is we're trying to understand. Avoiding black-and-white, judgmental thinking keeps us from harming others and from harming creation. Paradox also forces us to acknowledge our own limitations.

"Should we gather up the weeds from the fields?" the slaves ask of the householder. That's quite a lot of confidence from these slaves as to their weed-identifying ability. Likely misplaced confidence too. The text tells us specifically that the enemy sowed the fields with *tares*...not just any weeds, but *tares*. Tares are weeds that are nearly indistinguishable from wheat, but are toxic to humans.

Now let's involve Christ's explanation to this parable. The tares represent evil at work in the world while the fields are being worked for an abundant harvest. Black-and-white thinking says that evil should be immediately stamped out and thrown into that "furnace of fire" that Jesus mentions in verse 42. But that isn't what the Son of Man wants, such judgement and harm is not what we were created for.

Evil exists in the world that is easy enough to see. The paradox of this teaching, the tension that arises from it is that we are not called to root out evil. Instead we are called to acknowledge it and act with restraint in response to it. Why? Because we are limited in our evil-identifying ability and could easily harm others. Plus, such judgement belongs to God alone. Our work is to focus on the harvest, to care for that which is good and whole and life-giving in our world then trust that God is creating and recreating, forming and reforming our world.

⁴ Matthew 13:29

Ultimately we are being confronted with the tension that we simply cannot rid ourselves of everything bad without distorting and damaging what is good. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "Turn us loose with a machete and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we will spare." Followers of the Way are called to living with tension...to being comfortable with contradiction and paradox.

All of this is not to say that we should give evil a pass or ignore it. Rather the tension of paradox teaches us to acknowledge the tensions created by the paradoxes of our world, then to move slowly and with the Spirit's guidance and insight. Our task is not to rip the evil out of the field, but rather to tend and protect the good in the field instead. Which makes sense, since the field is not our to begin with.

There's where we can place our hope: the field isn't ours, it's God's! There is beautiful freedom in that acknowledgement! Especially since God is always bigger than we can imagine. God's timeline is always greater than we can know. And only God has the wisdom to truly tell the wheat from the tares. Only God can finish this great harvest.

In the meantime we continue to live with contradiction, with paradox. We are called to resist evil, but not to destroy it, for that only adds more evil and destruction into the world. We are called to tend to the fields, but also to acknowledge that the field isn't ours, nor are we the greatest field hands. We are called to continue on the Way...a Way that keeps us in liminal spaces...in in-between areas. And while there we are called to minister to, love and care for, those on the margins. Those who are being choked out by weeds.

Walking the Way of Christ involves a lot of paradox. It involves acknowledging hard realities...even contradictory ones. It involves letting go of certainty and instead living in the tension of the in-between. The Way of Christ will take us to liminal spaces, to the margins and outskirts. And the Way, which is a Way of paradox, will guide us in seeing what we need to see and serving how we are called to serve...carefully and with deliberation and intention. That is the gift of paradox. Amen.