

August 25, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6: 10-20; Psalm 34; John 6: 56-69

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Paradox is the holding of contradictory views or truths together. It may even be multiple contradictory truths together. It is living in a tension, which over the course of time, may sink in more deeply inside of us to reveal new insights—perhaps wisdom. It doesn't solve things. It doesn't fix things. It breaks us open to new insights.

Rabbi Dan and I, several months ago, were trying to explain this to some of the Town leaders of Danville. We said, *'This is the heart of spiritual life, living into paradox, and ambiguity and mystery, which we are trying to teach and lead our congregations into.'* And Rabbi Dan said, *'Mostly they don't get it.'* And I added, *'Neither do we.'*

Our texts for today, seem so straight ahead, don't they? (Is everybody going to sign up after worship?) *'Will you follow the God of the Amorites, or Yahweh? Put on the armor of God.'* [Joshua 24: 14-18] Ready?

Jesus says, *'Eat my flesh. Drink my blood. Or get out.'* [John 6: 52-56]

They appear obvious. They're not. These are profound paradoxes of almost great obscurity.

Ephesians has this brilliant insight it offers us today—that we are not here struggling against human enemies. No, it is Powers and Principalities, hidden capacities as if energies in this universe which are moving through all of us that corrupt and destroy the people and creatures of God. [Ephesians 6:12] But it remains elusive and hidden. And it is so hard for us to deal with because our Scriptures also insist, *'People are never the enemy.'* Human beings are God's sons and daughters, every one of us.

But history is filled with all kinds of examples of people giving way to these Powers and Principalities.

—The Egyptians hardness of heart, refusal to see the humanity of Hebrew slaves for 400 years. How can it go on for 400 years?

—The Japanese today freely speak of during World War II: *'It was a fever that seized us. A fascist, militarist fever overcame the whole nation, and it was only after the war ended that the fever broke. And the people of Japan said to each other, 'What happened to us? How did this happen among us?'*

—Apartheid. Fifty years of the most brutal campaign to exterminate people, because it was profitable. The whole world profited from Apartheid in South Africa. It was a 'Feeding Frenzy'. And America was in on it like everybody else. Did we see it?

—And this cult of lunacy all around us now, right? Where does that come from? People of power and authority, people with Ph.Ds, wilting like flowers before nonsense, before drivel, before assaults on the humanity of everyone.

Where does this come from? And how do we struggle with enemies that we can't see but are always on the move? And it can happen to us, can't it?

Well, Ephesians says, '*Put on the armor of God.*' Which is what? '*Wear truth like a belt. Put on that breastplate of righteousness wherever you go, and wear the sandals of peace, so that every step you take is bringing peace to those around you.*' [Ephesians 6: 13-16]

These are not weapons of war, are they? They are what the Scriptures call 'weapons of the spirit'. And here are a few of those weapons.

*Happy are the poor.* Happy are those who are empty. Happy are those who are filled with that vacancy, where they just don't really know what all's going on. '*...And what's happening to me in the inside right now? I'm unsure. Sometimes I feel lost.*' Happy are you because God is with you right there—not claiming the envy of the powerful, and the rich, and running the show. No, it's the emptiness which allows us to see in a new way. What a contradiction! Pick up the weapon of simplicity.

*Happy those who mourn.* My God, do we know mourning these days, don't we! Ourselves, our families, our loved ones, here in the congregation. Terminal diagnoses. What is going on? Happy those who mourn, because in the grieving you might be broken open to new insights, painful as it is. It's those who are grieving who can see a new way.

*Happy those who yield,* who don't exercise power, who aren't aggressive, who don't try to take what they deserve, but who give, and give away, and give way—who release what they have for the good of others, because in the end, it's not what we take that we'll be remembered for, it's what we give. *And then the whole earth will become yours.* The whole earth will become home. What a contradiction! What a paradox! Are you serious?

*Happy those with the pure heart who see from within,* who nourish that connection with God, so that they can, from time to time, see through the eyes of God—to see all in God and God in all. Happy those who contemplate and meditate and pray. What a paradox! Is that enough? Is it? Is that 'as good as it gets'? Is that why we came to church today?

Even the Gospels themselves are contradictory and paradoxical, and seeming to raise different priorities.

Mark is written to people persecuted in Syria. Is there hope? Has God abandoned us? Will we find the courage and encouragement we need to continue?

Matthew, as I just shared in the Beatitudes, [is] a collection of wisdom teachings from Jesus—profound paradoxes. Live into these.

Luke—always about healing and forgiveness and mercy. The Prodigal Son, huh? The Prodigal Child. The father who chases the child long before he or she ever turns around to come home. '*You're with me. You belong to me. Infinite love is yours. I shower it upon you, no matter what.*' And from the Cross, '*Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.*' That's not just for the

lunatics and the losers. It's for all of us, isn't it? 'We don't really know what we're doing.' *'It's okay. You're off the hook'*. Nobody, not even God expects that of us all the time. *'Just come home. Come home, you're welcome. The door's always wide-open. You belong.'*

And then there is John—the Seer we call him, the Visionary, that symbol of the eagle piercing the skies, who utterly insists on the Divinity of Christ. It is so strong for John. And it's almost as if he says to the rest of us, *'Would you back off? Do you think you know who this Christ is?'* The Gospels barely scratch the surface. This is one who lives out of excess and abundance and overflowing love for all 4,000 fed, 5,000 [at the] wedding at Cana, wine spilling everywhere, the abundance of grace will never stop.

This is the one who always exuding life, who cannot be controlled or contained, who cleanses the Temple all by himself. *'Get out, you manipulators, you marketeers, who think life is only about selling and buying. You would degrade life to simply consumerism.'*

And most of all, he desires our intimacy with the Holy One, that's the most precious gift Jesus wants to offer us. I and you, and you and me, and we in the Holy One, holding us, entering into that fullness of life with a joy and a compassion that the world has no idea about. The world just hopes for good times—*'Can't we have a couple of good times now and then, and then make it to the grave?'*

No, no. Every moment is a precious gift of creation, fullness of life, and we're in this together—the One who offers himself and that self-emptying love so that we can come to life. This crucified One who dies for our evil. This divine One who is crucified. That makes no sense—a crucified God? Christians ought to be the first ones to say, *'This makes no sense—a paradox beyond fathoming, but a mystery that touches our hearts.'*

This is the One who feeds us. Oh, taste and see, taste and see. The One whose love leads us through the deepest darkness we experience, and turns our hearts, always, towards Light, and Mercy, and Love.

What a God! What a paradox!

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.