

THE PARADOX OF FAITH
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
November 16, 2008

Reading: Jonah 1: 11 – 17 (NRSV)

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah is well known to us as a prophet. His reputation must have been credible, his credentials impeccable. He had graduated from Harvard Divinity School with honors and served several high steeple churches. People crowded to hear his Friday evening sermons and his midweek Torah study. He was the religion editor of the *Tarshish Daily Chronicle*. Surely for these reasons God chose Jonah to call the Nenevites to repentance. But by the third verse of the first chapter the preacher was on his way out of town. There are some congregations that preachers avoid. They are heard to pray, “Any church but that one, O

Lord.” When I was a Methodist minister and the bishop told me that he wanted to appoint me to an “opportunity,” I knew I was in deep trouble.

There is no question that Jonah knew what God wanted him to do. He understood the assignment and the clients he would be dealing with. Jonah was well acquainted with the people of Nineveh. And if you read the whole story of Jonah you know that we held them in hostile contempt. They were not deserving of God’s grace and when God gave it to them he was down right angry and strangely jealous.

To drive home that point remember that Jonah hid aboard a ship that was nearly capsized at sea. She would have gone down and all her sailors drowned because of Jonah’s unfaithfulness. Thrown overboard he was swallowed up by a big fish. He spent three days in the belly of that fish before he offered a prayer of petition that he be rescued. After he was spat out of the fish Jonah did the work that God had called him to do. But he did it with resentment. He never saw in the Ninevites what God saw in them; never believed they were worth saving, and complained when they turned from idolatry to the one true God as a result of his own preaching.

From the beginnings of the Christian church, the story of Jonah was a symbol for the resurrection. Like Jesus who spent three days in the tomb, Jonah spent three days in the fish. As Jesus was resurrected so

Jonah was thrown up from the deep – from the jaws of death – to life.

The church spoke of “the sign of Jonah.” In Matthew 12 we read:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” He answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here.” (38-41)

And thus we come to the great paradox of faith. We must enter the tomb to find life. We must let the ego die for the true self to emerge. There are many sayings in the tradition that keep pointing to this truth. “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” is chief among them.

Now anyone who has been brought up in the Christian tradition should not be surprised by the paradox of faith. But it is not something unique to Christianity. The Buddhist scriptures are very clear that our desires and our fears must die if we are ever to be free to live a rich and satisfying life. Hindus and Buddhists believe that we are forever strapped to the wheel of suffering as long as we are grasping and clinging to things, or people, or beliefs, or power. Freedom comes from the death

of obsession. Perhaps one of the most sublime teachings on paradox comes from the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu:

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

The Kingdom of God, said Jesus, is not some manor in England or some starry realm. It is right inside your own soul. That's right, the Master of the Universe has set up shop in your own little hearts. Talk about paradox!

I have found that the paradox of faith is not confined to metaphysics or lofty theological themes. It is as common as the clay of human beings who try to live faithfully in a world of competing passions and demands. Think of some of the major stories of the Bible. Who does God call to be the "chosen people?" God chooses a loose band called "Hebrews," who are nomads in the desert. God makes a covenant with this motley crew and promises to be their God – make them a light

unto the generations – and whose number will be greater than the stars.
 This same band of Jews suffers the pogroms of various czars,
 persecution, discrimination, and holocaust. The very idea that God
 would assume human flesh and suffer as a man is one of the most
 paradoxical possibilities of them all. Over and over again God chooses
 men and women of clay to bear the eternal message, “I love you.”

I sometimes think about my calling into the ministry. I raise my
 voice to heaven and pray:

“God, are you crazy?
 I am a man!
 part time sinner,
 part time saint
 full time wrestler with angels in darkness.

God, have you lost your mind?
 I am Moses,
 the visionary of holy fire
 whose heart blazes with anger
 toward the very people you sent me to serve.

God, are you nuts?
 I am Samson,
 defender of your chosen ones
 defenseless with desire for
 the beauty of Delilah everywhere.

God, are you crackers?
 I am David,
 giant slayer and shepherd’s poet,
 murderer of Uriah,
 seducer of Bathsheba.

God, have you lost your marbles?
 I am Mary Magdalene,
 common whore of misdirected love,
 extravagant bather of feet,
 embalmer of dead saviors.

God, are you crazy?
 I am Paul,
 arrogant spokesman of imperialism everywhere,
 persecutor of the faithful waiters of the world,
 speaking love in the tongues of men and angels.

God, are have your lost your mind?
 I never walk without a limp,
 preach without a stutter,
 heal without pain,
 break bread without crumbs or pour wine without spills.

The answer always seems to come back to me. God is wondrously and perfectly mad. Every time I think it is important to have a serious conversation about the brokenness of this world God wants to have a picnic, or a cookout on the beach. When I appeal for divine insight – even a good idea for a sermon would be nice – God gathers the children and tells a story. When I think it is about time that the church gets down to the business of saving souls or saving the budget, God gathers up the tackle and puts a sign on the door, “Gone fishing.”

I know that there are some people who cannot or will not appreciate the paradox, much less the irony, of Christian faith. I know that there are many more people who would like a sermon that is clear

and straightforward, or one that less prone to the opaque, absurd, ambiguous, and mysterious. I know that some people wish that their minister would make such a strong argument for God that creationists and scientists would pack the church every Sunday morning. Many people hope that their minister offered such unequivocal standards of ethics that pro-lifers and pro-choicers would hold hands together and sing “Amazing Grace.”

But don't you see? That is the paradox of the Christian faith. God comes to us in the mud and muck of life. God is with us in the joy and pain of marriage and childbirth, disease and death. God is present with those who stand for what is right and with us when we fall. The paradox of faith is that God is the ultimate judge of human behavior and would rather make the case for grace than punish any time. The good news is that God embraces us, full as we are with our own paradoxes, contradictions, ambiguities, uncertainties, and confusion.

Mary Oliver wrote about the disciples of Jesus, filled with hope and expectation. They were men who had promised to be strong of faith and powerful witnesses for the gospel. But the painful lesson of St. Paul is a lesson for all of us, “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

Mary wrote:

Gethsemane

The grass never sleeps.
Or the roses.
Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,
and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,
and heaven knows if it ever sleeps.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe
The wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move,
maybe
the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
blue pavement,
lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,
so utterly human, knowing this too
must be a part of the story.¹

I am not a limited edition of a man but a man of many limited conditions. I am not a one of a kind of Christian minister. Indeed, the flowers, crickets, lakes, and dogs are far more faithful than me. I am prone to slump and sleep. And yet I have come to have faith that all of this is part of a story that is bigger than myself. It is a faith story that is full of surprises and paradoxes. And every once in a while I get a glimpse of the Author. It is just enough to keep me reading.

¹ Mary Oliver, "Gethsemane," *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 45.