

“Dangerous Chemistry: The Naysayer; The Dreamer; The Hater”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

TRADITIONAL WORD

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.[e] 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. – Romans 12:9-13

CONTEMPORARY WORD

“To do nothing is within the power of all men.”--Samuel Johnson

“Dreams are the touchstones of our character” –Henry David Thoreau

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”– Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Dangerous Chemistry: The Naysayer; The Dreamer; The Hater”

When the Apostle Paul was planting religious communities around the Mediterranean during the first years of what we call “the church”, he encountered all kinds of human personalities—all kinds of chemistries—in his quest to create a new belief system based on the messiah that he had found in Jesus of Nazareth. Saint Paul encountered folks with the chemical make-up of legalism in one church (they were trying to figure out what to do with the laws of Torah and this new identity as followers of the Christ), and in Corinth he struggled with some chemical elements that were concerned with suing other members of the same church, something Paul was really against...in another community he had some female members whose chemical make-up was reacting poorly with others in the same community and he tried to deal with this as best he could, but we’re still paying the price for the words he used in THIS particular letter—and then in Thessalonica he had a chemical composition that was actually flourishing and reacting positively. Here was this master chemist trying to figure out how to work with all of the different (and potentially explosive) personalities he had given authority for in these new churches—the new communities.

Remember last week when Robin and the children were doing their science experiment with baking soda? And some of the kids wanted a big reaction? Well, St.

Paul was hopeful for a big positive reaction in his burgeoning churches—and what he got more often than not was a big negative reaction—an explosion of trouble. AND don't forget what happened after the chemical reaction last week. About twenty minutes later, when Robin was moving into this pulpit to deliver her message, she spoke of how the foul odor from the earlier experiment still lingered over her by the deacon's pew—remember? What we mustn't forget is that after the chemical reaction—the event that happens when we put two or more chemicals (humans) together—well, the aftereffects can linger for a long time. Twenty minutes or more in the case of Robin and the stinky vinegar and two thousand or so years in the case of Paul's various letters to the early churches. Dangerous chemistry has always been a component of followers of the Christ because there are so many potentially volatile combinations of chemicals (personalities) and we don't always know what we're going to get. Especially when we are dealing with three of the most potent of the chemicals: The Naysayer—the Dreamer – the Hater.

One of my favorite quotes in the entire pantheon of human writing is one sentence from Samuel Johnson (it's in your bulletins)—he writes: "To do nothing is within the power of all men...or all humans." To do nothing is within the power of all of us. Maintaining the status quo, leaving things as they are, is actually our default position—the naysayer—even those of us who think we are flexible and open to change. A landmark study from Harvard University actually proved that all of us, no matter how open-minded we like to think we are (and I'm specifically referring to myself here because this information rocked my world)...this study proved that all of us have a natural bias to maintain the status quo—keeping things exactly as they are is wired deep inside our minds. Let me read a bit from the study, particularly in regards to scientific progress, something you'd think would be immune from the status quo bias, right—well, this is from the study: Status Quo Bias in Decision Making--“The progress of science is commonly perceived as a continuous, incremental advance, as new discoveries are added to the accumulated body of scientific knowledge. [It has been] argued that the history of science tells a different story, in which discontinuities [disruptions] are crucial. Science proceeds by a series of revolutions. A prevailing [scientific] theory or paradigm is not overthrown by the accumulation of contrary evidence but rather by a new paradigm [a new way of looking at things] that, for whatever reasons, begins to be accepted by scientists. Between such revolutions, old ideas and beliefs persist and form barriers of resistance to alternative explanations. [It is noted that] the men who called Copernicus mad because he proclaimed that the earth moved were not just wrong. More to the point, what they meant by [the] earth was [a] fixed position. Their earth could not move... [and] more recently, Einstein's general theory was slow to be accepted by the scientific community. Many of its new proponents were attracted largely on aesthetic, not evidential, grounds. In these cases, the battle between old and new theories was resolved not by the power of proof, by verification or falsification, but ultimately by degree of belief. In his autobiography, [Max Planck]

writes that "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it." Or, as Aldous Huxley [more famously] said, "It is the fate of new truths to begin as heresies and end as superstitions." As we well know in both our own lives and in the life of this congregation, new ideas are suspect—they are seen as having "hidden agendas"—often seen as attempts to change things out of the desire to simply change things. And we know that, in most cases, this is not true—it is just our status quo bias rearing its ugly head and convincing us to stand still—to not change anything, regardless of what our hearts are telling us—we just heard about the scientific proof that regardless of our intention—we all lean to the side of the naysayer. That's some tough chemistry to have to begin with, right (?) and then, thrown into the mix, are some other chemicals (other personalities)—one of which I know drives some of the rest of you crazy (because I am one): The Dreamer.

There's a fascinating story in the Acts of the Apostles about a devout Roman Centurion, Cornelius, who is visited by an angel—a dream—hear these words from the writers of Luke/Acts. 10:1-16 "10 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. 2 He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. 3 One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." 4 He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; 6 he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, 8 and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa. 9 About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven."

Wow—that's quite a dream, isn't it? But the teaching of Luke/Acts seems to be one of trying to figure out how to assimilate gentiles and pagans into this new belief system that had sprung up around Jesus of Nazareth's teachings. Paul and the early church were struggling with the question of who belongs...who is in and who is out. So, we get the story of a dream from a Gentile Centurion, definitely someone who not be

considered a friend of Jews in general and a new sect of Judaism in particular. And the author of Luke/Acts has the “rock” of the church, Peter, also being visited by a dream in which a messenger from heaven suddenly announces that what “God has made clean, you must not call profane” and just like that, eons of adherence to Torah law, to the rules that declare certain animals may not be eaten—just like that, those deeply held religious beliefs are declared null and void. The conversion of Cornelius from a life of pagan worship within the Roman Civil religion is a decisive step in extending this new belief system into the world of the Gentiles. All of the visions, the angelic messengers and even the heavenly voices underscore the important point that God is directing the conversion of Gentiles into this new thing—this new community of believers. The “dreamers” of the new church would have of course encountered unyielding resistance from the existing Jewish order. There were many branches within Judaism during this time: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, the list goes on—and Josephus tells of a number of messianic movements during this time—charismatic preachers who were gathering followers and developing complicated belief systems. The established religious order of the day, the authority vested in the Second Temple in Jerusalem, would have been understandably resistant to all of these “dreamers”. For orthodox believers these dreams were seen as heresies and the dreamers themselves as apostate—outside of the community—the dreamers were declared to be “other”. And isn’t this what we tend to do with dreamers today? With those who ask us to change the status quo—to think outside of the existing structure—to maybe even recognize that the existing structure has terrible flaws in it that allows for the dehumanization of our neighbors? Well, when we hear words like that, our first thought is often “what we have has worked for us so well for so many years, why would we change it?” And this is a perfectly normal and expected response—as we just heard, science tells us that our natural, inherent inclination is to maintain the status quo. We put on our blinders and we go back to whatever it was we were doing, trying to ignore the radical, disruptive dreamer in our midst. And science also tells us that only great, big revolutionary disruptions can shake us out of our lethargy and force us to confront what needs to be changed. Peter’s dream shakes up centuries of established dietary law and makes way for the “other” to become part of the beloved community. Jesus’ dream of parity and equality shook the established order so much that they had him put to death—but his dream of loving God and loving neighbor shakes us still to this very day—because it is such a disruptive ideal. Loving your neighbor goes against everything that our current culture cherishes: Rugged individualism! How can we be “rugged individuals” and care for our neighbor? These are two diametrically opposed ideals. That’s why Jesus’ teachings are so radical because they challenged the existing social order then and they ask us to continue challenging injustice in our social order now. The dreamers of this world force us to examine why we hold certain things so tightly and why we allow other things to simply drift away on the breeze. Why do we cling to the great American ideal of “pulling yourself up by your

bootstraps” and let the biblical and moral exhortation of caring for the very least among us drift away on the wind?

Finally we have to deal with something that isn’t very fun to talk about but resides deep within all of us. Hatred. At this past week’s staff meeting we got into a really good discussion over this idea of “hate”. Robin has been leading the staff and some of our lay leadership through a team-building book call the Energy Bus and there’s some great stuff in there about how we create positive energy and how we try to keep negative energy and people off of our bus (I’m oversimplifying, but you get the main idea, I hope). Anyway, we started talking about negativity and even this idea of loving difficult people. And I was reminded that we are told numerous times in the scriptures that hate exists and that we must learn how to deal with it. That beautiful set of verses in Ecclesiastes that tells us there is a time for everything under the sun, includes the fact that there is a time for hate. I always stumble over this sentence when I read this scripture during a funeral, because I’m such an optimist it is difficult for me to hear God telling me that “hate” is part of the sacred order...but the fact remains—all of us has a deep capacity for hatred.

Robin reminded me that sometimes this hatred is for good—such as hating poverty or hating the way people treat each other—hating gun violence—hating economic inequality—I would add hating the driver in front of me, but that’s a little petty—I’m working on that.

Even Paul gets into the hating game in his letter to the Romans: “9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.[e] 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Romans 12:9-13”

So it would seem that hate is just as inborn part of human nature as maintaining the status quo. With all of this going against them, it’s a wonder the “dreamers” of the world ever accomplish anything! I would argue that the dreamers of this world must constantly dream with love. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us of this when he writes: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”– Martin Luther King, Jr.

Epilogue

So, we’re using the metaphor of chemistry and chemical reactions to explore how the people of a spiritual community might mix and remix and catalyze into new substances and ways of being and thinking...and we’re doing all of this to hopefully help us understand better when things happen—expected and unexpected—that creates change in the church. Change is going to happen—that is the natural order, and we’ve learned how we have a very natural tendency to resist any change. It

seems that to really effect great change requires a fundamental shift in our way of thinking—an earthquake that wakes us from our slumber—a word that triggers in us a reaction so powerful that we stop—take stock—and really think about what’s going on. And to remember that we are all the naysayer, the dreamer and, yes, even the hater, at different points in our lives—that’s just human nature.

Jesus of Nazareth shocked the people of his day, indeed he is shocking us still, but his earth-shaking teachings of love of God and love of neighbor resonate with us because they hold benefit for all of us. Jesus can be a catalyst for our various human/chemical combinations. Jesus can cause a reaction in us that changes us into different people. A catalyst for good change. Whether you’re the naysayer, the dreamer or even the hater, Jesus and his teachings can cause in you changes that are for the better—changes that improve the world, this town, this church and your own lives. Isn’t that a good thing? I’m so grateful for this chemistry set, this community, and how it interacts with the chemicals of Wichita—we’re changing our community for the better—one thought—one word—one act of kindness—at a time. And I’m grateful for that. Amen.

The choir is going to sing through our closing benediction once—then we’ll all sing it. Please stand as you are able and join in our closing song.

RESOURCES

<https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/fs/rzeckhau/status%20quo%20bias.pdf>

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_religious_movements

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12416-pseudo-messiahs>

http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/_merenlah/oppimateriaalit/text/english/judaism.htm