

Simple Stories?

John 8:1-11

Good Morning Friends, it's good to be together.

As a parent of two wonderful elementary schoolers, I spend a fair amount of time reading children's books and watching kids movies or TV shows. In those books and movies, the cast of characters is usually pretty predictable. There's a good guy, good girl, good animal - they're cute, kind, good natured and trying to accomplish something admirable. We all know who the good guy is. And then there's the bad guy, bad girl, bad animal - they're mean, inconsiderate, have a dastardly mustache, and evil laugh. They stop at nothing to cause chaos, or ruin someone's day. We all know who the bad guys are. These simple storylines and characters appeal to kids, and help them to see the basics of the story. Truth be told, even we adults from time to time love a simple story. My grandfather loved Old John Wayne Westerns, where John Wayne was always the good guy, won the shootout against the bad guy, and gets the girl. There's security in a simple storyline.

As we age, the stories change. More nuances are added, more characters on the pages of our novels or on our netflix shows are ambiguous. The storylines are less clean. Who's the good guy and who's the bad guy aren't always easily discernible. Sometimes a character is both a bad guy, and a good guy.

Recently, the church paid for me to take an Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary short course. The six week course that I took was called “Transforming Congregational Conflict” and it was taught by Dr. Betty Pries. Pries has over 28 years of experience coaching, mediating, training, facilitating and consulting/ Betty is highly regarded as a Conflict, Change, and Leadership Specialist. She is also a deep person of faith, and so a lot of her work has been in churches and para-church organizations. One of the modules, classes, that was part of the course was about dualistic thinking, and both/and thinking. She said that the ability to do this kind of thinking is characteristic of a strong, healthy person of faith. My ears perked up! We’ve talked about a Christian Discipleship is about the maturation of our faith, the patient acquisition of holiness. But in all my growing up years or my faith education, nobody had mentioned this particular quality- both/and thinking as part of that. And so I went down a rabbit hole, and this morning I’ll take you along with me. Let’s talk about what this sort of thinking is, why it matters, how we see it in the life and ministry of Jesus, and how this kind of thinking shapes us and more into the image of Jesus.

First, what is both/and thinking? Another term to describe it as both/and thinking or paradoxical thinking. Basically, this kind of thinking holds that two opposing ideas, viewpoints, can be true at the same time. Not true at different times or different scenarios, but equally true at the same time. “I love my kids more than anything, and I need a break.” “I’m sad my aunt died, and I’m happy she’s no longer suffering.” “My parents did their best, and it was still devastating.” “I’m sorry I yelled, and it’s not okay

for you to act that way.” “God loves me beyond measure, exactly as I am, and there is still room for improvement.”

This kind of thinking stands in contrast to “either/or” thinking, or black and white thinking, where only one thing can be true. “Either you’re for us, or you’re against us.” “We have to leave right this second, or we’re not going.” “I hated this book-there was nothing good about it.”

Now interestingly, this second kind of thinking, the either/thinking, is associated with children, teenagers and young adults. Research in neuroscience has shown that both/and thinking isn’t actually possible until about age 23. Their brains simply haven’t developed enough to grasp this idea. If you spend time with kids, you can see that in action, “That boy is not my friend, he was mean to me!” “It’s not fair!” “Her piece of cake is bigger- she’s your favorite!” Not a lot of nuance there. Dr. Pries in her lecture said that the ability to grasp this as we get older is startling. She would present a lecture about both/and, or paradoxical thinking to a group of 25 year olds, and they’d be like, “oh yes, that makes sense. I understand what you’re saying”, but when she’d present the exact same lecture to a group of college freshman, 18 or 19 year olds, she’d get lots of blank stares, questions, and so on. They simply couldn’t hold two opposing ideas together at the same time yet.

In the course of human development, we can learn to hold things in paradox, and employ both and thinking. “Mom and I sometimes fight, and we still love each other.” We

can hold both sides, both ideas, both thoughts together without making one side all good and the other side all bad.

Now, wouldn't it be great if when we all turned some magical age and suddenly we understand both/and ideas, nuance, and everything that was once black and white turns to a compassionate gray. "I disagree with them, and they're still great at their job." "I don't like this decision, and that's okay. We can still remain connected." "I'm a faithful follower of Jesus and I still make mistakes." Doesn't that sound like a more gracious, compassionate way to live? But if that just magically happened for all of us, I think that politics in the US and Canada would look very different.

This immature thinking, this either/or thinking is playing out in real time in the world today, through polarization. In a 2022 issue of Fuller Magazine, the magazine that is put out by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, Psychologist and Theologian, Brad Strawn, says this, "To say we live in a polarized world might be the understatement of the decade. It doesn't take long for new acquaintances to start sizing one another up. On what side of an issue do you land? Are you a Democrat or a Republican? Do you believe in climate change or do you think it is a hoax? Do you believe in the latest scientific findings or do you maintain a skeptical eye? Vaccine or no vaccine? Do you read Scripture as inerrant and infallible or do you have some other take? Loch Ness monster, yes or no? Well of course this last example is silly, but you get the point. The problem isn't that humans disagree with one another, or that we take sides and debate. Debate is good and can even be seen in the history of Christendom.

The problem is that as humans become more and more polarized in their reasoning, more *either/or* in their thinking, we begin to lose something. We lose our ability to be empathic, to recognize the essential value of one another, to realize a person is more than their opinion, and we lose the capacity for nuanced thinking. Things are *either* this *or* that, you are with us or against us, the issue is either black or white. Extreme polarization correlates with the takeover of our emotions such as anxiety and fear. The “other” and their terrible opinions threaten my world view, which makes me anxious, and the only recourse I feel I have is to attack, maybe with words or maybe with violence. And Christians are not immune.’’

In the three and a half years that have passed since Covid landed in Saskatchewan, it seems that polarization has only become worse. In the face of all the terrible unknown that covid brought, people have doubled down on what they do know, clinging more tightly than ever to their beliefs, principles and ideas. It’s easy to let the fear of the unknown make an idol of certainty. It’s easy to let the fear of the unknown make an idol out of certainty.

Yet, in the Bible, Jesus calls us to trust in a God and Gospel that is bigger than what should or shouldn’t be fair, a Gospel that is bigger than us and them.

In the scripture that Carrol read for us this morning, we find the pharisees bringing to Jesus a woman who was found in the act of adultery. HOW they found her and where on earth the MAN from the encounter is not addressed in this passage, though it does

raise some big questions for me. Regardless, she has broken the laws of Moses, of this the Pharisees are certain, and the law states that she should be stoned, of this the Pharisees are certain. And NO RABBI worth their salt could allow her to “get off” for her crimes, of this they are certain, and so they bring her to Jesus. They set this frightened, angry, embarrassed woman at the feet of Jesus and declare her crimes, reminding Jesus of what the prescribed consequence is. They await Jesus’s response. And what does he do? He kneels on the ground, scribbling in the sand. The Pharisee’s impatience grows, “Jesus, answer us!” The underlying question being, “Jesus give us the answer that we have already decided on!” Jesus stands up, turns to the men and says quite simply, “Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” With this one sentence, Jesus invites, demands the Pharisee’s to think in both/and terms, rather than either/or. She is a sinner, and so am I. She has broken the law, and so have I. Jesus turns a certain, vengeful mob towards compassion and introspection, for both themselves and for this woman. One by one, starting with the Elder Pharisees, the men drop their stones, drop their rage, drop their certainty, and walk away. Soon it just Jesus and the woman. And Jesus says to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” Here again, Jesus asks us to think paradoxically. Either or thinking would say, “Either this woman is guilty and deserves to be punished, or she is innocent and deserves to be released.” That would be the simplest story to tell—yes or no, right or wrong. But Jesus asks us again to hold both truths at the same time, “Yes, she sinned, and I’m extending grace. Yes, I forgive her, and I call her to repentance.”

It is this both/and truth about God's justice and God's grace, God's heart towards us that allows us to see ourselves, others and the world - As broken, and wholly, and dearly loved. Rachel Held Evans encapsulated this both/and reality when she wrote, "Cynicism is a powerful anesthetic (and I would argue polarization) we use to numb ourselves to pain, but which also, by its nature, numbs us to truth and joy. Grief is healthy. Even anger can be healthy. But numbing ourselves with cynicism in an effort to avoid feeling those things is not. When I write off all evangelicals as hateful and ignorant, I am numbing myself with cynicism. When I jeer at their foibles, I am numbing myself with cynicism. When I roll my eyes and fold my arms and say, "Well, I know God can't be present over there," I am numbing myself with cynicism. And I am missing out. I am missing out on a God who surprises us by showing up where we don't think God belongs. I am missing out on a God whose grace I need just as desperately, just as innately as the lady who dropped her child sponsorship in a protest against gay marriage. Cynicism may help us create simpler storylines with good guys and bad guys, but it doesn't make us any better at telling the truth, which is that most of us are a frightening mix of good and evil, sinner and saint."

How does this paradoxical thinking transform us more and more into the likeness of Jesus?

First, we're invited into radical compassion for both ourselves and others, and that grows in us good fruit. Brad Stawn, from Fuller Seminary again, "Living into both/and

paradoxical thinking may lead to two important realizations. First, the “other” over there—that person who is day to my night—is a whole embodied person just like me. They are *not* the sum of all their opinions, or even behaviors. They can’t be reduced to a bumper sticker (even if they have one on their car that I find offensive). They are complex, perhaps more complex than I imagine—maybe even just like me! Second, I am both light and shadow. I’m a complex person, and it is a developmental achievement to have ambivalent feelings and to live with ambiguity. I can bring myself down from my self-created idealistic pedestal. I can see that perhaps I am not without sin and maybe shouldn’t “cast the first stone.” Maybe these two truths, amid paradox, might just create a kinder me and a kinder world.”

Secondly, this thinking as paradoxical as it might sound, becomes a soil for hope to grow. I’ll be the first to admit that I read too much news online. I promise that I don’t go looking for bad news, mostly I read CBC and the New York Times, but sometimes it’s overwhelming, everything seems to be falling apart, everything can feel bad. But then I look at my kids, I look at the lovely people in this church, I look at people trying and being faithful to work of Jesus and loving their neighbors in their own contexts, and I think, “This is beautiful” And that gives me hope, hope to live in a world that is broken and beautiful, hope that people, myself, included are lost and found. Hope that the redemption of all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ both now and not yet.

To close this morning, I'll offer a bit more of Brad Stawns' article, he offers some really practical on the ground ways to practice and cultivate paradoxical thinking:

“The great news is that we can enhance our capacity for both/and thinking by building up our muscles to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence. We may do this in a number of different ways.

Spend time with others who are different from yourself.

Engage in projects and ministries that push you out of your comfort zone.

Read and listen to opinions different from yours.

Consider that you might be wrong.

When you feel anxious or defensive, get curious as to why.

Practice hospitality, empathy, and understanding toward differentness.

Find a blunt friend who will tell you the painful truth about yourself. This might be a therapist or counselor.

Become involved in a community that teaches, models, and lives out paradoxical both/and living.

As Scott Peck famously wrote in *The Road Less Traveled*, “Life is difficult.” I'd add, “Change is hard.” In certain ways it may feel easier, or more comfortable, to stay living in our old ways of being—clinging to either/or thinking. While the unexamined life might not be worth living, the examined life is no picnic! So, we can stay polarized individuals

and polarized communities lobbing emotional hand grenades at one another all the while experiencing the fallout in our own selves, or we can do the hard work (and make no mistake: it is work) of following the paradoxical rabbi, Jesus, the one who taught and lived both/and, and listening to the “still small” voice of the Spirit who will guide us in this difficult yet worthwhile way.”

Amen. Let's pray.