

The Paradox of Jesus' Life and Yours

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I look ahead on the preaching schedule and try to take a new look at the Gospel for that Sunday. When I re-read the Gospel for this Sunday, I tried doing it like a member of the congregation, coming to it as if for the first time. And, frankly, I was stumped! If you don't get it, we all don't get it!

I remember the adage which I've given to you a few times: a sermon is meant to comfort the disturbed or to disturb the comfortable. I don't find the Gospel this morning very comfortable, but at first reading I'm not so much disturbed as I am confused. What am I to make of "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have to come to set a man against father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household..."

How does that strike you? If you're not confused by Jesus' talking that way, you may just be doing what I think people do when they read things like that—you just pull the shades down in your mind. I'm not sure I'm helped enough by the commentary on this passage in the standard reference book, *The Interpreters Bible* where the learned writer notes that "this passage is not to be taken literally." I would like to know more than that. I would like to know more about the way that the Gospel authors often use hyperbole, exaggeration, metaphors to express the wonder and surprise that captured the attention and imagination of the growing crowds that came to hear Jesus. And especially, I would like to know more about the way that Jesus used paradox, used paradoxical language to express the deep truths not just of scripture but about all of life.

Think of that when you remember that *the definition of a paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a real truth.* Then you can begin to grasp one of the keys to understanding all that Jesus did, all that Jesus was and is, and how this can help us understand and live into the paradoxes of our own lives.

When Jesus began his teaching ministry he was aware that he was challenging a culture and a mind set that had been frozen into the authority of the “law and the prophets” and that he would have to express his criticism and opposition in a memorable way. He was calling people to a conversion change of heart, to a faith that would sustain his listeners in struggle and hardship. If his disciples could not grasp a new reality, a new sense of the ultimate in life, a new vision of authority, all in what he called the Kingdom of God, then there would be no way to comprehend the new thing that God was doing through him. “You love your father and mother—but I say there is more than that in the kingdom of God. You will have to quit betting your life on old securities, old expectations. So whoever does not give that up-- die at the intersection of life where the old meets the new—is not worthy of me,” Jesus’ says. But you may not like the way he says it sometimes: What about “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away!”—a genuine message in a package of exaggeration. But those who have discovered that vision of life, those who have found life, will say goodbye to the old life, and those who do that for my sake, says Jesus, will find new life.

It’s easy to write all this down and say it—but if Jesus’ had said it this way, it would have been long forgotten. It wasn’t forgotten because Jesus understood that life itself is paradoxical, life is often ambiguous, life is a mixture of both-ands and either-ors. In all of the struggle of life and meaning, some things must die in order that a quality of life worth eternalizing can emerge.

How do we know all that? He lived it, inviting a tax collector to dinner, healing a sick woman, telling stories. Scripture says he told parables, and in his own life acted out those parables.

And in those parables they began to understand, as now we can begin to understand, the paradoxes of life. Let me give you some examples, from parables you think you know:

The Prodigal Son—you know that story, don’t you? Where is the paradox? When the self-centered impulsive younger son gathers his inheritance, what at first appears to be a life of unmerited favor and luxury quickly becomes a life of poverty and servitude, and what he expects to come back home to that same kind of life, it turns out to be a celebration of the father’s extraordinary and unmerited favor and compassion, a symbol of God’s unconditional life. And for the elder son, who had always enjoyed his father’s favor because he had lived in obedience to the father, is, when faced with the challenge of living with his younger brother who is sharing in the father’s love, is revealed to be really the outsider living in self imposed exile. Paradox:-- *Those that appear to be insiders are really outsiders, while those that seem to be outsiders are really insiders.*

Or again in the Parable of the Good Samaritan—The Jewish priest and Levite, who appear to be agents of holiness and divine favor, are really objects of religious scorn and derision in passing by a beaten traveler lying in a ditch, just as the Samaritan outcast, who at first appears to be an object of social and religious scorn and derision, is really the agent of holiness and divine favor in tending to the needs of the beaten man. Paradox—*Those that appear to be upright are really the bad guys, while the foreign stranger turns out to be the good guy.*

And so it goes through all of Jesus' parables—the workers in the vineyard, the friend at midnight, the unforgiving slave, the unjust manager, the parable of the talents---what appears to be, is often the opposite. And all that depth and scope of Jesus' perception of paradoxical reversal of truths is seen especially in his aphorisms and pithy sayings such as the one he concludes with this morning “so whoever wants to save his own life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

It's fascinating to see Jesus' ministry in terms of paradoxes, and to witness sometimes in real life now how “servant” leadership, which may sound like an oxymoron, is actually being taught now in management schools, because it exemplifies how in our complex and integrating society the skills and talents of everyone must be optimized.

But of course for Christians it is more than fascination with opposites: it is the story of the life of Jesus himself, the living paradox. Humanly speaking, there is nothing about Jesus which explains the fact that, 20 centuries after His birth, He stands as the most influential figure who ever existed in human history. His teachings were paradoxical, but nothing is more so than what happened after he died on a lonely cross. He had challenged the establishment by saying that what he had claimed and taught would be proven true, and even after his death he was alive as hundreds and then thousands were transformed and changed by the spirit and power of his living life among them.

Today that paradoxical life can change us. It was said of a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of a top university who was starting a great well-paying job, and yet not very happy and still feeling lost and searching-- that here was a man who is “locked into a room with open doors.” That's a story of the paradox that many feel in this land of opportunity, wondering how they will find the key to making the choices one has to make in this world we're locked in with so many open doors.

And what I can say to you and all of us facing these and all of the paradoxes of life, is what Jesus said, so simple and so paradoxically full of power and meaning: “Follow Me!”