

## THE GIFT OF AMBIGUITY

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Mark 9:38-50

Buck Mountain Episcopal Church

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On the one hand....

On the other hand...

How often have you evaluated a situation by comparing its benefits with its drawbacks? How often have you made a list of pro's and con's – and, if you're like me, wound up feeling you STILL don't know which is the better way to go?

I have always envied people who can easily see which way a given decision should go – who seem to have some kind of inner vision that I don't have – who make the decision and hold fast to it and don't look back. Those people, God bless them, can be driven crazy by my dithering. To them, balancing “on the one hand” and “on the other hand” have limited effectiveness. To me, they're as comfy as old bedroom slippers.

I am sure and even adamant about a few important things. But there are a lot of other matters I could comfortably argue from two completely different viewpoints. My father gave me three pieces of career advice. I'm going to tell you two of them; I'm saving the third for another sermon. One was, Don't be a waitress, this because of my youthful tendency to pour coffee onto people rather than into cups. The second was, You should be a lawyer, because I loved to argue various points so much.

Well, I'm far from having the skills or knowledge of a lawyer. But I do love ambiguity. And frankly, my high tolerance for ambiguity helps me deal with some of our Lord's teachings.

Today's Gospel, for example. On the one hand ... He tells the disciples not to stop people who are using Jesus' name while not following Jesus' ways of life, not being a part of Jesus' community. Don't stop them, he says, because in the process of borrowing my name for their own purposes, they may be won over to me. Can't you just imagine Peter hearing this and wanting to argue with Jesus? “But Lord, he's running around claiming a connection with you, and he hasn't sat at your feet or stood guard at your healings or gotten footsore from traveling with you. We've earned the right to pray in your name and they haven't! We're entitled and they're NOT!”

Here as in many other places, Jesus says the rules aren't always right. Which must have been enough to make some of the disciples, at least, want to pull out their hair. This seeming ambiguity on Jesus' part had to be mind-blowing for his observant Jewish disciples. They were used to knowing the rules and following them. They knew

what was sacred and what was profane – or they thought they did, until Jesus came along.

But on the other hand ...

Jesus follows this dose of ambiguity immediately with hard-line sayings about getting thrown into the ocean with a millstone tied to you, and chopping off body parts if they threaten to drag you into sin. There is no ambiguity here! Lead the little ones astray and plonk! You're in the water, headed for a visit to Jonah's old buddy the whale, except unlike Jonah, you're gonna stay down there because that cement weight you're attached to won't let you come back up.

And you should be ready to give up things that you consider essential to life, if there's any chance those things – like parts of your body – might lead you astray. Sounds a bit extreme, doesn't it? Sounds, well, maybe, a little bit crazy? (I can't help but go there, since I have known not one but two people in psychiatric institutions who tried to cut off their hands in what they considered to be obedience to this passage.)

These verses about millstones and plucking out eyes are not, in the vernacular of our time, *nuanced*. They are not subtle or measured. They give us Jesus going to extremes – as he often did.

On the one hand ... Jesus as easy-going, forward-thinking teacher.  
On the other hand ... Jesus as fire-breathing judge.

How we deal with those two portraits of our Lord – how we reconcile them, if that's possible – will dictate how we live the Christian life. But reconciling them is not always easy. I was reminded of this when I read a review of two books that have come out recently. Both writers spent some time with Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. The first author was an American Protestant who went to work with Calcutta's sick and dying alongside Mother Teresa and her sisters. This woman found the experience tremendously deepening to her life of faith. She writes that she saw Jesus in Mother Teresa, who advised her, "Find your own Calcutta." She returned to America and has found her mission field, strangely enough, in the world of higher education.

The second author was a Catholic woman who joined the Missionaries of Charity as a postulant and spent some years with the order. For her, Mother Teresa appeared repressed, distressed, and not very holy at all. The authoritarianism of the order seemed harsh. The work of the order – caring for the desperately sick and dying, one at a time, doing small things with great love – frustrated this second author, who could envision efficiencies in the operation that would save more lives. The second author left the order and lost all faith in God.

Same order, more or less the same cast of characters. Totally different results – and obviously the results depend on the personalities and experiences of the two

different writers. But it's interesting that these two women experienced the arduous life of Christian service as – one the one hand – deepening, nourishing, life-giving – and on the other hand – restrictive, frustrating, soul-destroying.

To a less dramatic extent, these poles of religious experience show up in parish churches like ours. What one person finds nourishing and delightful, another person finds troubling or even outrageous. Woe to the priest who tries to play to both extremes! Woe to any leader in any setting who thinks he or she can make everybody happy!

Jesus knew this. He was the most authentic leader ever. He did not pander to anyone. He did not dumb anything down. He put the truth out there and let people deal with it, for better or for worse. He is still doing that, and it is up to us to respond.

Which is the real Jesus?

One of my favorite hymns starts with the line, “Christ is made the sure foundation.” But how sure can we be of that foundation's nature, when we see so many sides of this person-who-was-God reflected in scripture? Is Jesus the fire-breather or the favorite teacher, the harsh judge or the saving shepherd?

He is not either. He is both. He is not one or the other, but in him two – or more! – seemingly irreconcilable realities come together and create a new reality that is infinitely greater than the sum of its parts. In human affairs, such a coming together is sometimes called “emergent metaphor,” and you know what they say about metaphors. Well, at least what one person, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher, said about them: “A good metaphor is something even the police should keep an eye on.”

Yes, metaphors are powerful, even dangerous. And the metaphors created out of the seeming contradictions of our faith speak powerfully to us and fuel our journey. As Anglicans, we embrace a middle way – the *via media*. This is traditionally understood as the path between two extremes of Christian tradition, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant. But taking the middle way is also what happens when you allow the intellect to have its place in the Church and in people's religious experience. We also insist on mystery in our tradition – we insist on the sacramental. In a few minutes we will be going up to THE table again to do this most remarkable thing together in the name of the Lord. With our intellects, we can barely grasp it, but somehow our bodies seem to really “get it.” I saw the truth of this when my mother was dying. She was in and out of consciousness when a priest came to give her Communion. We weren't sure she knew what was going on until we got to the Lord's Prayer, when she seemed to be mumbling along, not very coherently. But when Bob said, “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven,” she knew what was happening. She held her hands out – like this – without even opening her eyes.

Your hand may know what your mind cannot understand. Your lips may move to God's music when you are completely helpless and unable to speak.

We can understand some things only obliquely, by instinct or supposition or reverie or hope or memory, maybe because we could not handle them at all if we were to receive them undiluted. We need to allow our whole selves – mind, soul, body – to take part in our quest to follow Christ. The ultimate meaning of who Jesus is for us is way too big to apprehend for any human being, but we will grasp enough to live according to his call if we bring all of ourselves to the table, and nothing less.

We will also need to bring to God's table a sense of humility. It is essential to the spiritual life, and not just because humility is a much-vaunted virtue and the opposite of that much-despised vice, arrogance. We need humility because it is the natural outcome of a simple recognition: We are not going to be able to parse this faith. It is too big for our big, fancy brains. It is too big even for that mysterious, elastic, invisible thing called the soul. We are going to die not knowing how to reconcile the different aspects of Jesus. But if we keep walking the walk and accepting our limitations, something wonderful seems to happen. We stop being worried about those seeming contradictions in the nature of Christ, and we start to focus on the essential. There is only one essential for anyone who seeks the Christian life, and there is really nothing ambiguous about it. (See, I told you that I'm sure about a few things!)

Here's what it is:  
On the one hand ... love.  
On the other hand ... love.

Love, beyond all analysis, beyond explanation, beyond destruction, but not beyond our grasp. We are sunk in God like a fish in the sea. We were made for God's love, made by and for God who IS love. All seeming contradiction falls away in the light of that love. There is no "one hand, other hand" about God's love. It is all God's hand, and that hand is more than good.

I'm going to borrow a phrase from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century English mystic Julian of Norwich. She lived in a cell built onto the outer wall of a church. There she prayed and received God's revelation of his Divine Love to her and to all of humanity. Her writings reveal a brilliant, questioning mind, but God answered her questions beyond her satisfaction. She wrote, "Between God and the soul, there is no between."

And a few centuries later, a Swiss Protestant theologian named Karl Barth had something similar to say. This extraordinary intellectual wrote massive tomes of theology and had a tremendous influence on Christian thought. You'd best believe he had lots of "on the one hands" and "on the other hands" in his dense philosophical writings.

One day towards the end of his life, Dr. Barth was asked to name the central theme of all these massive tomes. Karl Barth thought for a minute, and answered simply: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." AMEN