

RCL, Year 3, Proper 11

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

A Path to Peace

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As I've grown older, I have often observed how ambiguous things seem to have become.

When I was younger, I thought that I saw with much greater clarity. The good and bad, the right and wrong, were obvious to me. As I age, the world seems to be fading into a twilight shade of gray. The right and wrong and the good and bad seem much murkier.

In some ways, this is disconcerting. Something about us likes certainty. There is something comforting in knowing where we stand, and there is comfort in conviction that we stand on the side of the angels with regard to the important issues of our time.

Living in a murky, gray, ambiguous world is more difficult.

I would like to suggest, however, that when we see the world as ambiguous and shaded and nuanced--when we understand that telling right from wrong is not always so easy--then perhaps in fact we are seeing rightly and with greater clarity. The clearer vision of the real may lie in affirming the interdependence of a pair of propositions that seem to stand in opposition, rather than in siding with one proposition rather than another in an all or nothing gamble.

And I would like to further suggest that embracing this realization may be a step towards finding a path to peace and a home in God's all-embracing divine reality.

Western Christianity, particularly at the popular level, has long been plagued by dualism. The material world in which we live is seen as a fallen and corrupted place. The spiritual domain, where God abides, is somewhere else. This concept has had particularly disastrous affects with regard to bodies, which are somehow seen as dirty and corrupt and the source of passions that lead to sin, pulling us away from our higher spiritual selves.

Let me provide a couple of examples of how this sort of thinking often affects our understanding of central Christian doctrines. Eternal life, at the popular level, is often conceived as having something to do with spirits departing bodies and going somewhere else to exist in community with other spirits. That understanding differs from the dominant biblical vision of eternal life. As much as we may want to shy away from this, the Christian vision of eternal life is about bodily resurrection.

Now, I am not here pretending to understand this and I wouldn't begin to guess how and when we may come to know this reality. But I do want to emphasize that the Christian vision of eternal life is about life abundant and eternal in a new creation of our earth, this earth.

To take a second example, consider the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Again, I wouldn't pretend to try to explain the metaphysics of this. But at its core, I think, the doctrine of incarnation represents an embrace of this world, of bodily life, and yes of death, by the divine. The divine becomes human and lives and dies as one of us. The incarnation, it seems to me, is at its heart a doctrine of God with us and God among us and God for us.

The author of the letter to the Colossians provides of vision of the divine embrace of the world that stands as a powerful antidote to the dualism that I am suggesting we resist.

Recall the opening words: “Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together....For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.”

The vision of the Colossians is of a world shot through with the divine presence, of a world pervaded by God. It is a vision of a world in which the divine takes the entire world into the divine reality. This divine embrace includes all the world’s contradictions.

Under the power of this vision, dualism melts away. There is no question of God apart from the world; instead, there is a vision of God in the world, of the world subsisting in God. There is no suggestion that evil powers and principalities of the world are aligned against a God who is elsewhere than the world. Rather, there is a vision of a God who unites all thrones and dominions and rulers and principalities.

In this vision, the world dwells in God; the divine presence everywhere and always seeps into the world and pervades the world and sustains the world. And in this vision, in the end, there is no dualism, there are no fundamentals in opposition, for all is taken up into the divine reality and is reconciled to God.

I think that when we perceive dualities, propositions in opposition, often we are in possession of a piece of the truth, or a partial truth. But I think a deeper truth may be in our reach. Harold Oliver, a distinguished theologian and mentor to John Thatamanil, teaches that when we think of mind versus brain, physical versus mental, or God versus the world, we are missing the deeper reality. The deeper truth is that God is the ground that sustains these polarities in opposition.

The polarities only have meaning when grounded in a reality that allows the two to be perceived in relationship with one another. The relationship and that which sustains the possibility of the relationship is the deeper and abiding reality.

Let me share with you the words of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. I’d suggest that we not try to parse these words; rather, let the spirit of Whitehead’s poetic prose wash over us.

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many.

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the world.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the World creates God.

The Christian vocabulary works perfectly here. God, the ultimate reality, the reality that holds all things together, is love. Love isn’t a substance or a thing. Love is relationship. In Dr. Oliver’s words, when we say that God is love, we say that mutuality is reality.

Embracing this vision, settling into our home and taking our place in a world shot through with God, is a path to peace, I believe. As we live with this vision, the dualisms fade away. Yes and no, good and bad, are swept up into the divine whirlwind and ultimately seen as subordinate to the transcendent reality of the God who is love. The opposites are encompassed in a divine totality. What we come to see, as we embrace this

reality, is a world of apparent ambiguity. It is a world of both/and, rather than a world of either/or. Here lies a possible solution to the Mary and Martha puzzle. Yes to both Mary and Martha. Yes to both action and contemplation. Mary and Martha are bound together and united and reconciled in love for their savior.

This is not to deny evil and pain, the harmful and the unkind. It is to come to realize that evil and pain, the harmful and the unkind, are not powers of this world allied in a cosmic struggle against a distant God. No, evil and pain are our work, human work.

The vision of Colossians is that evil and pain, these powers and principalities, are in the end taken up into and reconciled to the God who holds all things together. The central ritual of our faith, which are about to reenact, lets us live this vision. The divine embraces human life; the divine welcomes our gifts of bread and wine; the divine dies with us again and again on the cross; and the divine ultimately holds all things together in the divine reality of eternal love.

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