

Faith as Paradox

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

March 10, 2024

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When you think of yours or my “faith experience,” there is little that is straight forward or simple. Think of those complex moments where things just don’t make sense – you may not realize it at the time, but our faith is challenged, sometimes changed, when we face a situation doesn’t make sense.

Think of the many heart-wrenching injustices happening to people presently. Russia launches a pre-emptive war on Ukraine (the reasons for this invasion are very complex, of course) but, we watch in horror the death and violence; Israelis are slaughtered and taken hostage by Palestinian extremists, and an immediate Israeli military response is legitimate, seeking safety and security for its people. But now, after the decimation of Gaza infrastructure, and death count continuing to rise, we wonder where God is in the midst of this.

I have shared before how I saw my faith as a child rather like a fairy tale – rather flimsy, idealistic. God is in complete control of things. There was a great deal chalked up to mystery in my childhood faith, but I had the privilege of not feeling in danger, or experiencing prejudice, so I was protected from most unfairness that many in my world dealt with. I grew up into adult, as we all do.

In adulthood, my “fairy tale faith” did not have the capacity to answer tough questions, like why terrible things happen to wonderful people? Why is injustice allowed to happen when God is in charge of everything? What about those clichés taught to me in Sunday school like how Jesus was meant to die, his suffering and death was redemptive? Theological College, for ministers and priests, and certainly for me, that was a place where fairy tale faith melted by the crucible of challenging questions and debate, and a new, adaptive, faith emerged.

Life is that crucible, that tough test of fairy tale faiths, for us. When we face paradoxes¹, those conundrums where two opposing realities exist, we have to either decide – one or the other – or somehow, we have to keep them in tension, and be ok with that.

Therein is Peter, today. Ah Peter, with his faith that is tested, As Jesus who has just promoted him to the head of the class for his faith – you are the rock on which this movement will be built. But then, Jesus, so wise, a healer, and Peter knows him to be the Son of God – surely, Peter must think, Jesus is above human frailty. Peter felt safe under Jesus’ wing, until, according to the Gospel story, today, Jesus begins talking about facing a terrible death. That would mean that he, Peter, might be feeling the grief – whether he recognizes it or not – of no longer having Jesus to help him to cope with the complex world he lives in.

A paradox: on one hand, Jesus, a powerful, holy, one, but that in conflict with this new revelation that he will face suffering and death. Theologically, how do we get our heads and hearts around the idea of God becoming human, and dying?

¹ From the Cambridge Dictionary, a paradox: a situation or statement that seems impossible or is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

At one moment, Peter's journey makes sense, then, the next moment, the future looks very uncertain.

Have we had those crucible moments in our life and faith? Perhaps it was a moment where you were in danger, perhaps your safety or your life felt in the balance. Perhaps you faced something that felt very unfair. Maybe people whom you respected or trusted, faithful people, looked at that situation differently from you. How did you resolve that? Did you accept their viewpoint, or, did you stand your ground, accepting the discomfort and conflict?

The person you see on the screen is Gustavo Gutiérrez.² He is a Roman Catholic priest who grew up in Lima, Peru, surrounded by poverty and injustice. Gutiérrez had an enormous faith, believing that God worked in community, that poverty was not God's will. His church, the Catholic Church based in Rome, far from his context of poverty and injustice, did not like some of his views, the Pope even publicly repudiating his theology as dangerous.

Gustavo's theology was rooted in God's vision of liberation for Latin American people, and that people should not be afraid of the political undertones of challenging their structures. Poverty and death of innocents around Father Gutierrez was very political, very unjust. He helped to construct what now is known around the world as Liberation Theology, firmly grounded in the principle that God had a special concern for the poor, the oppressed, the victims of injustice.

Of course, God cares for comfortable people; perhaps you feel like a comfortable person (I do!), and Give loves ridiculously rich people. Poverty, injustice, the deaths of innocent people, however, is not part of God's will. God's kin dom vision is liberation – remember those paradoxes Jesus proclaimed in his sermon on the mount or on the plain: *The last shall be first, and the first, last.* [Matthew 19, 30]³

To people who are comfortable, Jesus' teachings are baffling. I am one of those who still struggles with the mystery and paradox of my evolving faith. Things that just should not go together: Light and darkness; Joy and grief; a love that emerges from the ashes left by hatred and violence; Jesus, the Word (becoming) flesh and blood, and (moving) into the neighbourhood.⁴

Holding in tension these seemingly opposing ideas, at times, can, I think, only be done with great faith, an acceptance of great mystery, and being equipped with profound humility in order to unlearn old, unhealthy ideas and faith, in order to be open to new, courageous ways that are grounded in love and mystery. Faith has that capacity, for Peter, and us, to open us up to courage and love. Amen.

² For more information about Gustavo Gutiérrez and Liberation Theology, you can click on this link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustavo-Gutierrez>

³ Matthew 19: 16-30, Jesus tells a parable to a rich young man who cannot let go of his material possessions in order to follow Jesus. This story is filled with paradoxes. Letting of wealth to gain spiritually, for example.

⁴ Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 14. The Message Translation. The Message (MSG) © 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Found at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A+14&version=MSG>