Both/And

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen on April 15th, 2018

Readings: *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice and the Promise of America* by Eboo Patel; 1st Letter of John, 3:1 – 7

Every year, Middle Collegiate Church hosts a conference that's entitled "Revolutionary Love." It's a multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural conference that seeks to open conversations about dismantling racism and provide tools to do so in various faith communities. There's always this incredible energy from the diversity of folks who attend the conference and the heavy-hitting justice seekers who lead plenaries and presentations. So Saturday morning, kicking off a session entitled "Race, Poverty, and a Path to Redemption," we eagerly sat down to hear the legendary freedom fighter Ruby Sales in conversation with another legendary freedom fighter, Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis. Some of you may know Jacqui as the senior minister of Middle Church and one of my mentors, and Ms. Ruby Sales I can only briefly describe as one who has spent a lifetime putting her body on the line for the dignity of her people in order to clear a path for the dignity of all people. Now, these two leaders have a lot in common and are also dear friends. They have a shared cultural memory though coming from different backgrounds – Ruby from the south and Jacqui from the south side of Chicago – as black women of Christian faith who have experienced the profound poverty that is the legacy of our shared history enslavement and utter human degradation. So generally, Ruby and Jacqui tend to agree on a lot. But as they engaged each other in this conversation around the intersection of race, poverty, and gender, major tensions arose. "We are called to be spiritual provocateurs," Ruby suggested, through a process she describes as "purging ourselves of empire consciousness and moving toward mountaintop consciousness." Jacqui begged to differ: "you get to have wealth;" she said, "if you came from parents who had wealth, good for you! You have a right to that wealth; but what I'm asking of my wealthy friends is that they put their wealth into the fight for justice." This really irked Ruby – she pushed back and pushed back hard, because, in her words, "reparations are non-material," but Jacqui held strong in her argument that we need to think about how we use our money – "I'm saying," she declared, "Ruby, it's a little hard to talk about repairing the social and spiritual harm that's happened when your stomach is rumbling." Ruby raised her voice as she argued back: "but Jacqui, until we create new consciousness we will just be recreating empire structures and producing new elites."

Now, this went on for some time, and evoked various stirrings from the listeners, discomfort, some nervous laughter. I think it disarmed some because there was an unspoken assumption that the collective "We," as revolutionary love-seekers, were all on the same page all the time. At the end of the session, the two women did not agree – and yet, with the love and recognition they had for each other, Jacqui leaned over, hugged Ruby, and tenderly kissed her cheek. They sat with their arms around each other for several moments, leaning in close and speaking softly to each other with smiles as a photographer nearby captured their exchange. And for all that was said, that final moment was the most powerful. Because these two women had the spiritual wisdom to be, as Ruby said, spiritual provocateurs – not with the world around them, or others that totally think differently, but with each other. To challenge each other in loving mutual regard and acknowledge the profound messiness in the work of repairing what has been torn asunder.

It is not always easy or simple to engage each other in any issue of justice, let alone where there is fundamental difference in worldview. While we exist in a community where we together acknowledge inherent difference and generally broach theological disagreements with respect, it is here where we must practice digging deeper by reconciling ourselves to the very texts that would threaten to refute our fundamental regard for plurality. If we don't, we water down our own spiritual challenges and rob ourselves of the tools to empower conversations across the religious spectrum, whether it is with people outside of our traditions, or with those who take a more closed theological standpoint within our own tradition. In the words of Unitarian Universalist theologian Galen Guengerich, "if we don't use these texts, someone else will." Meaning, if we don't fully grapple with the stuff that feels a little exclusive in our sacred texts, others who claim a more closed worldview will – and usually, that ends up looking like reifying who's in and who's out. Our 1st Letter of John is one of these tough texts, and it's usually approached in one of two ways: to support the singularity of Christian theological claims, or to cherry-pick its feel-good love language without addressing the more exclusive language. Our passage is a small window into the whole letter, but it points to the larger framework for the letter, in which the writer seeks to differentiate who understands God and who doesn't – with the implications being those who don't correctly understand who Jesus was simply cannot understand God. Without context, this is a pretty weighty claim at best, and dangerous in its capacity to eradicate otherness at worst. But where the letter speaks of a somewhat high Christology, meaning a fierce belief in Jesus as a divine atoning figure, if we listen with our whole being – including our conscience - what we can hear within the singular rhetoric is a more universal truth: that knowing God, experiencing the divine on an embodied level is realized through to an internal transformation of values, which the writer of John gets at in chapter two, verse 29: "realize that everyone who lives righteously has received the new life from him." It is in this message that we might come to move beyond the particulars and into the universal.

So I feel there are two reasons where high Christology can present a difficult challenge within our sacred texts: 1) In a multi-cultural, even multi-faith setting, it does not seem to address – or even acknowledge - the reality of the divine's diverse manifestations in the world; and 2) it appears to minimize the gospel message itself by decentering Jesus' lived ministry – I mean the concrete actions he took within his own community and then outside his own community – and re-centering his divine nature and atonement on the cross through a belief system codified by creeds and doctrines that have less to do with how we behave in the world and more to do with what we believe in our hearts.

Now: this is perhaps the biggest chasm and best argument between what we might call orthodox theology and progressive theology. Within Christianity, it shows up in the texts like these letters attributed to John – but what we need to understand in order to approach these texts with both love for ourselves and love for each other is what the Johannine writings were trying to do. While recent scholarship isn't convinced that the same person authored John's letters and John's gospel, there is a consensus that a particular type of community existed for which these texts were meant. New Testament scholar Judith Lieu describes the strategy of John's first letter as an attempt to foster a tight community that distinguished itself by its particular beliefs and intended to separate itself from the world at large as well as the other Jesus-following communities. It was never meant to address a wide variety of Jesus-followers that came from different backgrounds, like what we would find in Paul's letter to the Galatians, but rather a group that had experienced some kind of schism and believed strongly that Jesus

was about to return and that they would be judged for how they understood him. This is the kind of group that sought singularity, rather than Paul's more inclusive plurality, from the start. The other letters to John also address so-called "correct" belief, but this one has an urgency that seeks to eradicate whatever internal variations on theology were present in order to systemize beliefs for a highly sectarian group. Lieu points out that the "Johannine tradition," as it's called, "does not just refer to a way of speaking or writing but to a way of thinking…most fundamentally this worldview is characterized by a dualism between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hatred;" and as goes with any kind of dualistic thinking, there leaves little room for the complexity of lived experience that inhabits a long and wide-reaching spectrum of humanity. As Lieu puts it, "people belong to one or the other side, and there can be no easy or repeated movement between the two." When people belong to one or the other side, not only can there be no easy or repeated movement between the two, but more often, people stop trying altogether, as the ability to acknowledge the multiplicity of human experience is lost within a binary division between how one sees love and hatred, which is how I would characterize we are seeing from a great number of leaders in this era. Rather than acknowledging that our Culture (as if it is singular) is in fact many cultures, that our history has created many firsts for humanity yet is also dark and oppressive toward the majority of our own people, that the systems in place are far from a perfect capitalistic democratic system, there exists a need to cling to a linear narrative of Americanism that excludes the realities of how the nation came into existence, what that does to our variant cultures within the nation, and ultimately creates a false binary between who is "in" and who is "out." Who is "one of us" vs. "one of them." Thus it was that Eboo Patel, post 9/11, came to the work of interfaith bridge-building as a way to dismantle such binary thinking that is built into our faith traditions and bleeds into our political systems. As we know, the experience of foreign terrorism on our own soil perpetrated by an extremist faction using religious ideology had a rippling effect on many of our American communities upon how they viewed Islam, since it was the root tradition in which this particular terrorism claimed to have found inspiration. Patel began the Interfaith Youth Core not as a defensive measure against the erupting Islamaphobia, but because he personally was touched by a Jewish colleague who made it is his mission to dismantle Islamaphobia and a southern evangelical pastor who traveled the country and did the same.

It's somewhat easy to talk about the idea of pluralism and how great it is and how good we are at it in our own community, but it's much more complex to examine the stuff in our own traditions that contributes to division. I struggle every time I'm presented with certain texts that seem, at first glance, to be quite clear in their exclusion. But there is a tension inherent in any faith system that exists between the claims that tradition makes upon its exact moral correctness and what our lived experiences show us of a world that is beautifully, messily, and perfectly plural. Patel's excerpt in our first reading told us of the triangle he discovered in how to build relationships by breaking down biases through interpersonal contact and real, factual knowledge. But he also notes that the triangle can work in the reverse as well – when misinformation is comforting enough, and spread around enough, when one encounter with a person wholly other is experienced as negative, the either/or way of thinking takes us over and keeps us from our better selves. What I want to propose is that the space in between the either/or is where we find God. That there is room for both claiming a solid and personal theology that is consonant with our experience, and honoring the wholeness of those whose theologies feel uncomfortably other. The beauty in our Judeo-Christian traditions is that plurality is inherent in both constructs, but even more so in Christianity, which by its very

nature sought to reconcile Jewish law with a universal law for Jews and non-Jews alike, born out of an empire that reached across multiple cultures, languages and ethnicities. Our own Bible is a collection of many, many voices and experiences of God across many, many eras – with the richness and diversity of the different cultures from whom our texts come. I've talked a bit about the psychological concept of multiple selves – the idea that all human beings are fluid, made up of the many experiences and people we've encountered from the time we're born to the time we die – and that our wellbeing is found not in repudiating our variant ways of responding to different people and situations and working toward a totally unified way of existing in the world, but rather by embracing and holding together the reality that we have a little 5-year-old self within us, a 15-year-old self, a 30-year-old self, a 50-year-old self all living within us as we go through life. Once we accept this, we then being recognizing that these voices come into all of our interactions. The wisdom and clarity begins to emerge once we can identify which of our aspects is reacting – which allows us then to recognize this in others. Without this sense of multiple voices, we can find ourselves reading a text like John at face value – and interpreting it as a proof that only people who identify Jesus as messiah really know God. But instead of throwing out this text or leaving it be for those who would claim a singular view that excludes the divinity of others, we might instead honor that universal idea of an internal transformation of values within the particular idea of the author's experience of God through Jesus as Christ. That doesn't mean erasing one person's high Christology or diminishing another's discomfort with atonement language. It becomes about expanding our own limited understanding of how God speaks.

Just yesterday, UCC President Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer summed up this very difficult task by calling us to consider the future of faith if it is to be relevant for humanity both on the individual and the communal level. And though he was speaking to a particularly Christian audience, he declared, "our task it to move beyond the particulars of beliefs and toward a sharing of core values. And by core values I mean what will restore human community and build shalom." *What will restore human community and build shalom.* It starts with our own grappling with our theological messiness, and then it moves outward to engaging in conversations with people who would cling to their own worldview till the cows come home. It does chip away, slowly, sometimes minutely, at those who choose to only hold an either/or by having the grace and willingness to hold the both/and *for* them. It looks like Ruby Sales and Jacqui Lewis holding each other accountable to their words and actions in order to get to that shalom; but it also looks like sitting down and having the tough conversations with people who are calling our neighbors thieves, rapists and murderers. When we do it, we are making a little bit of space where a wedge has been placed, unlocking a door so that it might possibly be opened in time. Creating that triangle of movement that originates with the holy spirit and ends with us. When we do this, we can finally, as John says, "see what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God; for that is what we are."