



Pastor's Reflection - October 1, 2020

At the heart of every one of our cell phones, apple watches, computers, I-pads, and every other digital device are incredibly complex little processors that are based in a very simple technology. Each one of these processors contains millions of tiny circuits that are either on or off. They can't be both. They can't be neither. Behind every computation, photograph, piece of music or anything that happens on any of your devices, there are millions of these little on or off circuits. The digital age is all about the mutually exclusive binary choice.

As the digital age has come to full fruition, the essence of that technology rooted in mutual exclusion seems to have infiltrated our lives and taken root in our very being. More and more, we have adopted the either/or essence of digital technology and made it part of our human operating systems.

It bears mentioning that the binary essence of digital technology works well in cell-phones, computers and I-pads. It is predictable and accurate. It has made all sorts of wonderful things possible in computation, analysis, information storage, communication, entertainment, and more. It is, however, a destructive and divisive basis for engagement with community & human relationship... Furthermore it inhibits the understanding of broader truths, deeper meanings, and spiritual purpose.

In this binary digital age, we have, I fear, lost the ability to hold two or more related truths together as we seek meaning. We have a hard time with subtlety, nuance and shades of meaning. We are unable or unwilling to consider issues of context, relevance, history or other factors, choosing instead to focus on the either / or, good or bad, right or wrong. In a time of binary assessment, the realm of mystery in which spirituality resides is threatened.

While that either/or paradigm can make the analysis of any person or situation simpler, and while some people prize that sort of reductionist decision making as a boon to clarity, the trouble is that there is much in our world that cannot be rightly understood in terms of either/ or analysis. There is, in fact, a huge universe of truth that can only be fully understood in terms of both/and, multivalence and conditionality. Often, full understanding requires that we hold two or more truths together, teasing out the meaning in the tension between them.

Writing today in the afterglow of what was the "dumpster fire" of a presidential debate last night, it could not be more evident that in the realm of political ideology, this either/or binary mindset inhibits conversation, understanding and compromise.

Because each side is convinced of the rightness of their respective positions, they see no possibility of truth in the other. The preservation of the “correct” political ideology is everything. The pursuit of dialogue and consideration of other’s ideas is nothing. It’s either our way or their way... and our way is the only right way. Given that political progress is predicated upon compromise, this is a real problem.

This binary approach to life stands behind the toxic political divisions that have separated us, repelling us from one another as if we were magnetic poles of the same charge. It facilitates our embrace of a moral and intellectual laziness that defaults to easy classification of the other as right or wrong and further categorization of those we deem right as good and those we think wrong as bad, allowing us to more easily discount them, discard them, and ignore their views.

More and more we think of others as either purely evil or purely good; in one case irredeemable in the other incorruptible. From a Christian point of view, though, incorruptibility is the realm of God alone, and irredeemability is nothing more than a statement of unfaith in the saving power of Jesus Christ who made clear that he came for the salvation of the whole world. – John 3:17

We see others as good or bad, friend or foe. We love them or we hate them. They are with us or against us. They are one of us or one of them. The problem with this, as noted earlier, is that makes it easier to write folks off, easier to dismiss them as other or beyond the pale. The problem with that for people who say they follow Jesus is that Jesus himself was loathe to dismiss *anybody*; unwilling to write off even those who stood in the most stark opposition to him. We ought not forget that the one we follow proclaimed forgiveness for those who stood at the foot of his cross taunting him... the very ones who nailed him to that tree. (Luke 23:34)

It clear that no faithful, blessed, full relationship can be based in the binary either/or structure we have come to embrace. The people with whom we are blessed to share this life are complex packages of emotions, passions, fears, failings, dreams, non-quantifiable aesthetics and shared experiences... all of it decidedly non-binary stuff. Nonetheless, as we relate to each other and strive to be in community we feel the gravitational tug of the either/or. You have seen and heard these things.

As people demonstrated and rioted in the wake of the killings of unarmed black folks this summer, some lumped together the cases of the protestors and the rioters condemning both as a single unified anarchic impulse. Others seemed to embrace all of it together as a morally defensible effort justified by 4+ centuries of oppression and frustration. Rather than saying all of it was bad, or all that all of it was good, would it not be more truthful to say that there is merit in protesting against systemic injustice, AND there is a moral problem with burning, looting, destruction and violence? To write off those on one side of the issue, is to write off the possibility of reconciliation. And to write off reconciliation cannot possibly be pleasing the Lord of whom scripture says, in *Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,* not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.* (2 Corinthians 5:19)

I hear a growing chorus of voices proclaiming that one must either embrace everything about our country as it is, or get out! Really? Isn't it possible to embrace the freedom, opportunity, creativity and all the rest that is life giving, without giving up the right to critique what's is broken and the responsibility to work for an even better reality? Didn't Jesus do that? In fact, isn't that precisely what he did when he came to the Temple mount and cleaned the place out overturning the money-changers tables, chasing the merchants out with a whip of chords and shouting, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations But you have made it a den of robbers!*" – Mark 11:17

Lately, I have been hearing that either/or sort of discussion taking place around capitalism and patriotism. Either you affirm unfettered unregulated capitalism, or you must throw in with the "Godless communists" - a most "un-American" posture. So they say. But it seems clear to me that capitalism holds both the promise of liberation, AND the potential for oppression, equity AND dystopian stratification, freedom AND the potential for shackling in place the disadvantaged, wonderful magnanimity AND ugly self-centeredness. It also seems clear to me that the proper place of the Christian in such a system is to work and advocate for those whom the system leaves damaged, to offer care, compassion and justice. I realize that Cain's question, "am I my brother's keeper" in Genesis 4, did not elicit a direct Yes or No response from God. Then again, none of us really wonders where God stands on the question, do we?

Science or religion? There are many who hold that the claims of each invalidates the other...that it is either/or. You have heard those who deny mountains of scientific evidence to pursue instead a falsely literalistic understanding of the Biblical story. Denying geological truths, paleontological evidence, and biological fact, they put together a "creationism" museum in Williamston KY. to "prove" that the earth is thousands, not millions of years old and that evolutionary thought is an anti-religious hoax. Their point seems to be that one could not possibly affirm both science and Christianity.

Humanistically oriented folks, on the other hand, systematically champion the findings of science as over against religion, holding that religion is nothing more than the perpetuation of prescientific world-ordering superstition. As a Christian person, I am not convinced that one must deny rationality and scientific endeavor in order to embrace the truth of Christ. Neither am I convinced that science has cornered the market on truth and that the embrace of scientific thought requires one to claim atheistic underpinnings. Isn't God the God of All? (Jeremiah. 32:27) Hasn't God blessed us with intellectual gifts allowing us to reason, study and discern observable truth? The fact of the matter is that both science AND religion are needed in order to understand the world and our place in it. The truth is that both science and religion reveal essential truths. The scientific realm asks what? And how? The realm of religious truth asks the essential questions, why? and whom? We Christians need to be asking all of these questions if we are to faithfully care for the earth and all those with whom we share it.

Politically, societally, familially, economically and technologically, we've been co-opted by the binary, and the result has been tragic. I would suggest further that such a binary conception of the world is at odds with our faith tradition as Lutherans. We understand

the truth of God and of our life in the kingdom not so much in either/or terms, but both/and.

One of the key theological formulations of the Lutheran reformation was *Simul justus et peccator*, a Latin phrase meaning, “Simultaneously justified and sinful.” It was a corrective to the binary assessment of people as either sinful or righteous, good or bad. We are, according to Luther and Scripture, simultaneously saints and sinners. The dividing line between sinfulness and righteousness does not so much cut between people, as it cuts through the center of each one of us. (Romans 7:19-25) To recognize the same would go a long way toward generating humility that would facilitate honest relationship with others and would help us to avoid the distortion of relationships and destruction of community that comes with writing off certain folks as corrupted, evil, not worth the effort.

Our binary world has trouble with more than either /or. It labels more nuanced, contextualized thought as nambi-pambi equivocation. Nonetheless, Lutherans hold that the scriptures speak a saving truth that is more than either-or. Is one saved by their good works, their Christ influenced words and deeds, or is it faith and trust in Jesus alone that yields salvation? A lot of folks think that the Lutheran mantra of salvation by grace alone through faith alone cinches it with a neat binary truth, but Luther spoke of the natural concomitance of good works with a life of true faith. In one sense, good works are not needed for salvation, yet they are the anticipated natural produce of a faithful life. (Mt 21:43, John 13:12-15, James 2:20-26)

What about communion? Is the bread and the wine simply a representation of Jesus as the Reformed theologians said, or is it literally the blood and flesh of Jesus as the Catholics maintained? Luther said, rather, that Christ is “in, with and under” the bread and wine. It’s more than an either/or reality. God is not constrained to either/or expression that’s a human shortcut that fails to express the depth of spiritual truth.

Suffice it to say that the digital age with its binary structures has meant a giant leap forward in communication, computation, education, entertainment and more. Nonetheless, the infiltration of that binary either/or essence into our spiritual and communal lives has been disastrous. It has diminished human relationships, limited our understanding of divine power and activity and corrupted our understanding of our calling as Jesus’ disciples.

So the next time you pull out your cell phone or type on your computer, or work with your favorite digital device, I pray that you’ll remember not only the blessings but also the limitations of digital/binary thought. I hope and pray for you, our church, our nation and world that we might eschew the binary and seek to know the truth of what God has given us in all of its richness, complexity, diversity and nuance. That’s where we’ll find the deepest blessing. Oh, and one last thing - the love of God? Well it’s neither binary nor non-binary. It just is... all the time and without question ... for you and for all.

Pastor Brown