

FAITH AND AMBIGUITY
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When Mary Baard called me in June inviting me to preach this Sunday, I was in Chicago at Loyola University with a group of professors. My wife Beverly called me to relay Mary's invitation, and I asked her to look at the United Church of Christ desk calendar and see what the lectionary readings are for this Sunday. When she told me, I said "That's good; there are at least four sermons in those lessons. Every one of them has a message. "

The lectionary is a calendar of biblical readings for the church year. It is a way of teaching that goes back to the Jewish synagogue. The purpose of the lectionary is like a curriculum in a school. It provides a structure for study so that you get an essential education. It was probably used by Jesus when he was at his home synagogue in Nazareth. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus was about 30 when he stood up to read. The Isaiah scroll was the reading for that day and when it was handed to Jesus, he emphasizes verses from it that announce the beginning of his ministry. Over 50 years later people remembered that lectionary reading as it is reported in Luke's gospel (Luke 4:16-20). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

In the United Church of Christ, we are not bound by the lectionary readings. The pastor can choose other biblical readings. There are times when topical preaching is a necessity. Particular issues must be faced immediately. Special needs known by the pastor must be addressed. But in the long run, the advantage of the lectionary readings is that it guides the church over a three year period with a general view of the entire bible and the story of our faith. Further, the use of the lectionary by the large body of the churches in Christendom helps to provide a common mind as the church worldwide goes through the years.

The bible is crucial for the guidance of the church to be a faithful church in a world of continually competing voices. One of the Protestant Reformation's and the early Congregational movement's reasons for withdrawing from the Church of England was to follow more closely the principle of the authority of scripture as the rule of faith and practice. Today when the First Parish Church Council asks the congregation what it wants this church to be and to do, our answers should come with understanding of scripture as well as historical, sociological, psychological, economic and other studies. Opinion surveys and focus groups without a biblically literate church council and congregation, we are more likely to reflect mainly the popular culture of the time, its current fads and popular tastes. Without a biblical basis we are not a continuation of the wisdom and living encounter of the Christian faith rooted in the primal and originating story of God. In our church, Jack Kiefer's 9:00 A.M. Sunday Bible class for adults along with our Christian education programs ought to be overflowing. If we answer who we want to be without attention to scriptural teaching, we are just an echo of the world around us.

The four texts for today from the lectionary bring before us one of the continuing issues of daily life, the connection between our faith in the future and the ambiguities of life. We all long for certainty. We are all uncomfortable with ambiguity. Ambiguity is a word compounded out of two Latin root terms, *ambi* meaning "both" as in ambidextrous, and *agere*, meaning to drive as in the word "agent." The feeling of being torn between two directions or of uncertainty about what to do is a state of ambiguity. Dislike of ambiguity is rooted in our evolutionary background and shared with the animal kingdom. For survival, animals learn that inconsistencies, sudden movements, unfamiliar sounds, changes in surrounding patterns are sometimes warnings and signs of danger.

Like them, we want to know where we are, what's going on, and what's going to happen next. It is to this situation that today's readings speak.

In the big picture of these four texts for today, we are dealing with one of the grand questions that nag at us as we live in a very complicated and dangerous world. We all awake every day to hear the news that is so constantly broadcast. A large part of it is trivial, distracting, and of short term value. But the big question in the background is how are we doing? The biblical message is that we are a part of God's grand movement in history from chaos and division, from strife and war toward unity and peace. Against this faith, the texts we will see call us to trust, to remain steadfast and loyal to a reality in the making wherever we are.

In the first text from Genesis 29:15-28 Jacob, grandson of Abraham, receiver of God's promise, has arrived at the home of Laban where he has been sent by his mother to avoid his brother Esau's anger and to find a wife. Rebecca, Jacob's mother, does well what good mothers do. She tries to get Jacob out of trouble with his brother over stealing Esau's birthright and gets him interested in going to visit their relatives. The story is loaded with intrigue and action worthy of a movie or the Maine State Music Theater. We can't notice all the details, but when Jacob arrives, his uncle Laban's daughter Rachel, who is truly beautiful, is out taking care of the sheep. Jacob sees her and is immediately captivated by her beauty. He walks up and moves a large stone from the mouth of a well, a stone so large that it usually took several men to move it. Next he turns and kisses Rachel, and cries aloud. He is so passionate. Then he turns to Rachel and says "It's okay Rachel. I am your father's kinsman." Ambiguity? There's some right here. What are Jacob's intentions? When Laban, Rachel's father, hears about Jacob, he is delighted and invites him to stay. Again, ambiguity is here. What are Laban's intentions? One of the reasons for wanting Jacob to stay is not just hospitality but that after hearing about the way Jacob moved the stone at the well Laban can see what a good worker Jacob could be. So after a month, Laban is impressed with Jacob and offers to pay him to stay and work for Laban. But Jacob, shrewd as he is asks for more, he wants to have Rachel for his wife. He wants her so much that Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel.

After the seven years is completed, and Jacob thinks Laban is giving him Rachel for his wife. Laban throws a big party and afterwards Jacob goes into a honeymoon tent provided thinking he is going into sleep with Rachel. When morning comes, Jacob discovers that Laban has tricked him and given him his older daughter Leah. Laban has an excuse ready made and says that it is not right, the older sister Leah, not Rachel, should marry first. That is the custom in their country. So Jacob agrees to work for another seven years in order to marry Rachel even though he now has a wife Leah. Ambiguity is everywhere.

Remember that in this story a lot depends upon Jacob in God's plan for the future of the world. Jacob is the descendant of Abraham who has to carry forward the working out of God's promise to Abraham for all humankind. Yet what we see in Jacob and Laban are persons of mixed and impure motives, hardly ideals of human behavior.

The Genesis stories tell the ways of God's working with humankind in a realistic way. The realism in this story is a painful one in our eyes today with greater respect and awareness of women's rights and needs. The novel *THE RED TENT* has imaginatively explored the woman's view of what Leah and other women might have been thinking and feeling in this situation of polygamy. Yet these landmark episodes tell us that God's way in history is to work with fallible people and through the twisting and deviating turns of life. These dramatic episodes in which we see the way God works in history show God acting through our confusion and divided loyalties.

Caring for us comes as a gift not because we have earned it, but because God is generous. Jacob's blessings come not as rewards but as grace.

The second lectionary reading from the Psalms for today puts together the meaning of Jacob's story in this way: "O give thanks to the Lord....Remember the wonderful works God has done....O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones." (105:5-6). That's a view looking back when things now seem clearer and better. If you were there at the time, the way forward for the faith of Israel would have seemed murky and ambiguous. No light yet at the end of the tunnel. Looking back, the Psalmist rejoices that despite the many challenges and difficulties of the past, God's care prevails.

So what is faith? The most basic meaning of faith is trusting the reality seen in the God of Jesus Christ. Paul Tillich, Protestant theological giant of the 20th century and a minister in educational work of the United Church of Christ, once said that the best scriptural definition of faith is the great commandment, "The Lord our God is one, you shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31). In short, faith is to trust giving yourself to a loving way of life represented by Jesus. To trust in that way of life with your heart, soul, mind and strength is a courageous choice, which takes us to the next text.

The third text of the lectionary is from Paul's letter to the Romans, one of the most quoted passages of the New Testament. They are words often heard at funerals, at the bed side of the dying, and when tragedy has seemed overwhelming. It is a statement of faith in contradiction to ambiguity. It is a statement of certainty against ultimate doubt. Many of you can quote the words. They begin with a sweeping statement: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...." (Rom. 8:28) and climax with the affirmation of faith "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39).

These words are comforting for the hope they give. In spite of the worst things that might happen, Paul claims they cannot separate us from God's love. This love is seen in the fact that not even Jesus death on the cross could prevent God's raising Jesus from the tomb of defeat to victory over the destructive powers that crucified him. Like the Psalmist looking back at Jacob from Jerusalem and rejoicing, we can look back at Jesus' death and victory knowing that among all the signs of discord and disruption, God's way of love has worked and is working now it ways into our history. It may be a fragile and shaky example, but when I saw on Thursday on the front page of THE PORTLAND PRESS HERALD a picture of the great baseball player "Big Papi David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox" reaching out to Lucien, a six year old with cerebral palsy, I thought of Jesus' announced mission "good news to the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind...to let the oppressed go free." David Ortiz's Children's Fund and all the charities are ways in our ambiguous world where step-by-step God's love is working. In fact, it reminded me that those many mailings and pleas for contributions that arrive so regularly in the mail are opportunities to decide to be a part of God's love for everyone, which takes us to our last and fourth lesson.

In this lesson from Matthew's gospel (13:31-33, 44-52), Jesus is teaching the disciples with parables what the kingdom of heaven is like. Parables are analogies or comparisons in story form. The question at hand is 'How does the kingdom come?' Jesus delivers in this passage 4 quick answers. First, the kingdom comes like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree where birds build their nests. God grows the kingdom from tiny beginnings. Therefore, we should not despair

our lack of total control. The small deeds, the candle lit in the darkness, the cup of kindness, God's kingdom comes through them even when it seems nothing is happening or all is lost.

The second and third parables tell us how valuable our acts of care and kindness are. Though small, they are the treasures of the kingdom of heaven. They are like a person who discovers gold in a field and sells everything he has in order to have that field. But in God's kingdom, the field is the unity with God's purpose of love for all that overcomes the ambiguity of what direction we should be going and puts its whole self into God's way of love. Or going further in the third parable, the kingdom is like the accomplished person who already has fine virtues, pearls of wisdom, mastery of ways of the world but having discovered the value of God's love for self and neighbor turns all these gifts and accomplishments into serving God's way of love as the finest gem of all. In these parables, Jesus tells the disciples that if they understand this then they will be prepared for the judgment of history.

Because we are free in our hearts to choose who we want to be, we have to live in ambiguity day by day. As the existentialists say, we are condemned to freedom. Every moment, every day is a new choice amid the ambiguities of life. The lessons claim that God is active in our everyday choices, not compelling but inviting. In the grand conflicts such as poverty and starvation, environmental degradation, and wars between national states we have God's ultimate power of love working even when the situation is ambiguous. We are challenged to believe that when we pray in the Lord's prayer "Thy Kingdom Come on earth as it is in heaven" that it does come in the choices we make. Instead of worrying about how the future will turn out, we are asked to look back and remember the wonders of God's power in the past and to know that it is working now. "O give thanks to the Lord....Remember the wonderful works God has done. O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, God's chosen ones."