

Third Sunday After Pentecost

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Introduction

Jesus puts the paradoxes and disorder of daily life in a cosmic context, leading us further into contradiction where truth lies. How do we navigate such seeming contradictions in our own life and in the life of the world?

Text

Matthew 10:24–39

‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

‘So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Comment

For anarchy to be avoided some kind of order is necessary. In the Quaker world this is called ‘right-ordering.’ Quakers aim to apply our best practice to the confusion and conflict in the world around us and so discover, through the stillness, deeper truths by which to live.

Some amount of order is necessary – and when the boundaries of order are pushed beyond limit, look around, trust the process, ‘for nothing is covered that will not be uncovered.’ Ultimately good and right will prevail.

In the midst of conflict, protracted injustice, endless abuse of power and privilege, and the destruction of the earth’s resources, this reassurance may be unbelievable. Infuriating even.

As we navigate from lockdown to trusting our instincts more, to whom can we turn for guidance? In confusing and conflicting contexts, a ‘do not be afraid’ may sound like the most hollow kind of ‘trust me’ from an untrustworthy boss. So where do we look for reassurance?

Paradoxes pepper this text. They illustrate that the life we are called to lead will not be easy. There may be fewer black and white choices, more grey areas which we are called to navigate as best we can. We who choose to follow Jesus must not be surprised by contradictions. In addition to being called in to chaotic settings where it seems that order has been lost, we may also find ourselves moving into situations of conflict – indeed, we may find our actions provoking conflict and division. Perhaps we should even expect to encounter such chaos if we are indeed following Jesus. This chaotic, contradictory world of conflict is the world of faith – which is why we will need courage and confidence.

When things matter, there may be chaos. When important decisions are to be made there may be conflict. Don’t be surprised if what is expected as peace actually feels troublesome, even violent. Don’t be bemused if you discover that those you love most also infuriate you, bring out the worst in you: ‘family will become foe.’

Hugh MacDiarmid, wrote of belonging and identity in “The Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle.” There he describes the upside-down nature of the universe:

“Men see their wairld turned tapsalteerie,

Drookit in a licht owr eerie,

Or sent birlinn like a peerie – “

This birlinn, whirling, tapsalteerie (topsy-turvy) universe of which we are a part puts light and dark in the same space together and asks us not so much to make sense of the paradox , but rather to move through, dig deep into, and dwell in the complexities of life with our heart and our soul.

The threads that hold this text from Matthew's gospel together are threads of reassurance similar to those MacDiarmid offers.

Expect confusion and disorder – but do not be afraid.

Expect division and conflict – but do not falter from the searching for truth.

Expect pain and exclusion – but remember that you are as beloved as the least of God's creatures.

There may be confusion and disorder amongst humans, but Jesus simultaneously offers clarity:

Acknowledge me. Love me.

Follow me.

Take up the cross: lose your life for my sake.

Response

What paradoxes do you notice in your own day to day life? In the life of the body politic? What responses do you notice in yourself to paradox and confusion?

Quaker's talk about seeking 'right-ordering' within church polity. How does your faith community seek to act with integrity?

Prayer

God of the whisper and the yell,
of peace and of fury,
guard us this day and this night
as we seek clarity within chaos.

May we embrace contradiction
as a signal that what is in front of us
really matters –
and so leads to deeper commitment
to understand the other,
to the desire to push through paradox
until we land gently on truth –
truths that are bundled up
in the tiniest of moments
and the smallest of sparks
which we sing

from the ‘tip’ of our lungs,
in Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills