

Paradoxically Speaking (Mark 13.1-8)
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I read the lectionary text very differently this week thanks to my Buddhist friends. In fact, if it were not for my Buddhist friends, I am not entirely sure that I would still be a Christian...because it was my Buddhist friends who helped me to look at Jesus in a new way. This is the first paradox in a short sermon that will be made almost entirely of paradoxes, but it is true. As I have studied another tradition, I have felt more deeply rooted in my own. With this disclaimer, then, this paradoxical bow to my Buddhist teachers, I'll begin.

When you go to your cushion to sit in the Buddhist zazen style or in the pose of a contemplative Christian, you may begin to practice a paradox. It is the paradox of doing nothing but sitting, breathing, and trying to listen to your mind and body. The paradox comes in the effort to do what should be involuntary. Because while it seems like it would be the easiest thing in the world to sit still and breathe, more days than not it is quite difficult. It is an exercise in concentrating and trying not to concentrate, in relaxing and in not feeling very relaxed, in observing a ritual that is not about observing a ritual. It is, I think, a time to practice coming to terms with the truth that our lives are made of paradoxes and we are each invited to enter them, to sit with them for awhile and see what they bring us.

Many of us who grew up in the Christian tradition were taught the paradoxes early on if not how to sit with them. In my own case, as a child I was told that we are to love our enemies, we are to give up our lives to find them, we are to make ourselves last in order to become first, and so on. I suppose the most fantastic paradox we were taught was that

the rabbi Jesus was both human and divine, two things that were distinct opposites yet were at the same time true. And so very early I remember that my curiosity was piqued, my questions were welcomed, and I was encouraged not only to explore the tensions of the aforementioned paradoxes, but to keep searching for other paradoxes that could be found in our tradition. Of course, I found plenty. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that I have long had a distaste for answers easily given, puzzles readily solved, and religion ironed out into neat creeds and clean doctrines. I never did find much of that sort of thing in the teachings of Jesus, who spoke in rather more mysterious ways. Sometimes his ethic sounded so easy that it was not at all easy. Sometimes he rejected ways of being religious in order to accept ways of being religious. Sometimes his words came out angrily but weren't angry at all so much as they were bittersweet, full of sorrow. And sometimes his hearers listened very carefully and had no idea what he was saying. That's how Mark's gospel tells it, anyway.

According to the story in the Book of Mark, Jesus is almost never understood by the disciples who travel alongside him. In this morning's lectionary reading he offers them a teaching that is, in essence, a paradox, but they don't seem to follow. It may be enough to remind us all of the church. Not this church alone, but the whole church, the larger tradition, a tradition that has made a name for itself in the name of the rabbi by offering a lot of certainty through its creeds and doctrines and elaborate theological constructions. In fact, I would wager that when most people think of Christianity they do not think of its paradoxes but its propositions. I suspect that most people think that being a part of the Christian church is about accepting propositions like the virgin birth of Jesus or his literal resurrection from the dead. And while I do not wish to assail anyone's conscientious

belief, I do not personally believe that our religion is about the acceptance of such doctrines. I, for one, do not accept them as doctrines but as paradoxes. When I think of the rabbi, the questions that come to me are more metaphorical than they are literal. What does it mean, I am caused to wonder, to have humanity and divinity undivided? How are we to understand that life and death are both parts of us, our being and our nonbeing simultaneously present? Where am I to go with these ideas, and how am I to live if I take these paradoxes of faith even halfway seriously? And the only answer that we might find this morning is an answer that is not given by the rabbi...another paradox.

As Mark tells it, Jesus and the disciples emerge from the temple one day and begin to admire its stonework. Some of the disciples offer that the stones are quite impressive and they stand in awe of the temple complex. Jesus answers their observation by telling them that there isn't a stone there that won't come down, that they should be mindful not of what is but of what isn't...or of what one day won't be. Most interpreters have taken Jesus' response to be prophetic oracle and I think it does represent such an oracle, but if we follow our paradoxical theme, I think we might also hear the playfulness and indeterminacy that are parts of it. Instead of hearing Jesus' words as woeful predictions, we might hear them as we would hear any subversive wisdom. Perhaps he is suggesting that what the temple stands for can only be known when the temple has fallen. Perhaps he is hinting that what appears to be permanent is itself impermanent. Perhaps he is teaching that only as his friends cast off their tradition can they ever learn to find it again...if not in stone then somewhere else.

As the text continues, so do the strange ideas. Mark says that sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, a few of the disciples ask Jesus to interpret signs and tell

them when the temple will be destroyed. He answers them with more prophetic oracles, saying that false teachers will come, there will be wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters will take place, and so on. It's the sort of thing that would have anyone on the edge of their seat, and just when we expect to hear some traditional interpretive ending, the rabbi offers only a final paradox. "But all of this, this ending," he adds, "this is...the beginning." And here I would invite you to go ahead and laugh or shake your head, scratch your temple, roll your eyes. I wonder if the rabbi didn't do it himself, smiling a bit when he said to the hapless disciples, "This ending is the beginning."

If I had never studied with Buddhists, I don't think I ever would have been able to hear this text in a non-Western way. The Western way is to immediately begin fretting about apocalypticism and eschatology. It is to carefully research the historic temple and the timeline of its destruction and later re-emergence. It is to sift through the other gospels for comparison's sake and then non-canonical material looking for some pearl of sermonic insight. I've actually done all of those things and found nothing of particular interest. But thanks to my Buddhist friends, I think I'm okay with this. Because sometimes the searching isn't about the finding. Sometimes the question isn't about the answer. Sometimes the teaching is in the paradox itself, the way of opposites and the creative tension they offer. And to interpret this saying in such a light is to hear Jesus saying that we need not fear losing the old forms...for losing and finding are just parts of the same paradox.

It reminds me of the many in this church, the many in liberal Christianity who have given up things only to find them again later. I have heard time and time again from people in this community how they gave up hating the inerrant, infallible Bible only to

fall in love with the deeply human poetry of our sacred stories. I have heard how people stopped rejecting an orthodox view of the Easter story only to start accepting the metaphor that new life can be brought forth from suffering. I have heard how people quit fussing over the words in the hymnbook only to find themselves floating on the universal language of music. I have even heard of people who forswore the baptists only to find themselves joining this baptist church and laughing at their luck. It's enough to make us trust in paradoxes. More than that, it's enough to make us look for them, which may have been what the rabbi had in mind all along.

I mentioned at the outset that it was my Buddhist friends who have helped me, as much as anyone, to understand the teachings of Jesus. For it is they who have shown me how to sit quietly with a paradoxical saying and see what it might bring. And I suppose I'll just leave us with a final paradox, something from another tradition that can help us look more deeply into our own. On occasion, while sitting in meditation, Buddhist monks will repeat a mantra in their minds. Once the busy thoughts of the day have subsided and they are able to introduce a few words of their own, the monks may add something like, "I breathe in the suffering of the world...and I breathe out compassion." Today I would invite us into a moment of such breathing with a few mantras of our own, meant to help us contemplate some of the paradoxes of our tradition. As I finish the proclamation and we enter a time of reflection, I will offer four or five of the teachings of Jesus. Each one of them is a paradox. The teachings are playful and serious, they are simple and complex, they are for the inner world and the outer one.

So I invite you now to make yourself comfortable for a couple of minutes of mindful sitting. You may wish to shift about in your seat. You may wish to put down something

you are holding. You may wish to remove your glasses, relax your shoulders, close your eyes, and begin taking deep breaths.

[Time here for people to get comfortable and to breathe deeply.]

The way that Jesus taught is a way of many paradoxes. We end in silence now, considering some of the sayings of the rabbi. He said...

One day the stones will fall. It will be the end and the beginning.

He said...

The last shall become first and the first shall become last.

He said...

We can save our lives when we lose them.

He said...

We love our enemies.

And he said...

The kingdom of heaven is spread out on earth...

[Silence.]

Amen.