

Honoring the Mystery
Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregational Church
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Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Don't search for answers now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Letters to a Young Poet*

6. We find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.

—from “The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9
 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

You know, I encounter a lot of folks who are open and receptive, who want to go on a spiritual quest. Only there's a problem. They see other people of faith who are way too sure of themselves, who seem to have all the answers, who—when it comes to God—know it all. And it rings hollow to them and seems counterfeit. And they say to themselves, “If that is what religion is about, then I don't want it.”

Frankly, I don't blame them. There is a group who has claimed exclusive ownership of the title, “Christian,” and it turns off many people. And we progressive Christians (whatever that term means) need to do a better job at getting the word out that there is an alternative.

One of my favorite writers, Parker Palmer, once said:

I had thought that living spiritually required a resolution of all contraries and tensions...

But then he concluded,

Perhaps contractions are not impediments to the spiritual life, but an integral part of it. Through them we learn that the power for life comes from God, not us.

The spiritual journey sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. And should it not be so? The wholeness of the Spirit contrasts dramatically with the brokenness of our persons and our world.

We can resolve the tension by either turning away from God's brilliance or by denying our own brokenness. Or we can choose the way, as Palmer puts it, of "living the contradictions."

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up.

As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean. He came closer still and called out "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

"I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" To this, the young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

Faith is being able to live and act hopefully and confidently without all the answers, without resolution, in the face of our human limitations.

And so this is a community where you might be likely to discover more questions than answers. If you come here hoping to be given The Answer, you may be disappointed.

I have encountered many folks who get frustrated that I don't feed them the answers. There's something comforting about living in absolute certainty. It's alluring.

But for Jesus, the primary purpose of the sacred writings, laws and traditions was not to give answers, but to help people wake up and become aware, alive to the presence of God. And for him, this was a lifelong endeavor. This reminds me of a great comment by the poet, Maya Angelou. She said,

When people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians, my first response is the question, “Really—Already?” It seems to me it is a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian.

There’s a church that I like that describes itself as “a place to grow you soul, not just save it.” “Spiritual life is a journey, not a destination,” they say. And I think this is somewhat true about this congregation, that people are encouraged to search and seek and grow. None of us has “arrived.” The journey never stops.

There are some folks who don’t want to hear that their spiritual journey has only just begun. They want it over with. Searching and seeking is hard work. In a progressive congregation, everyone has just begun. We’re all beginners.

And so of the “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity,” today I’m focusing on the sixth point:

We find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.

Former director of The Center for Progressive Christianity, Jim Adams, wrote,

According to the gospels, Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a straight question. Instead he responded with another question or told a puzzling story. At the risk of disappointing his questioners, Jesus put them in a position of having to think for themselves...Jesus would not provide absolute answers because answers, by providing false confidence and security, become barriers to an awareness of God. Answers become substitutes for God.

It takes courage to have questions and to live with mystery. Easy answers are the easy way out. There’s a bumper sticker that I’ve referred to before: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” A literal interpretation of the Bible that provides all the answers is comforting. One can just then confidently drive down the road. A progressive Christianity, on the other hand, *takes the Bible seriously but not literally*, it seems to me.

A progressive faith acknowledges and honors the mystery. The poet Rilke wrote,

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Don’t search for answers now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Learning to “love the questions”—not just to put up with them but *love* them and to *live* them—this is what the religious task is all about.

Several years ago I read an article by Anne Lamott, in which she wrote,

The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty. It is madness. You can tell you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do. The first holy truth in God 101 is that men and women of true faith have always had to accept the mystery of God's identity and love and ways. I hate that, but it's the truth.

I love that line, "The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty." Jesus had plenty of encounters with those who spoke with too much certainty. And I suppose there is a part of each of us that wants this certainty, too.

This is what I want to say today: No one of us can claim to be the sole voice of God. No one of us can claim to have the Absolute Truth.

Only God is Absolute Truth. "You shall have no other gods before me." Of course, it is idolatry to claim Absolute Truth for ourselves. We create graven images when we speak with too much certainty.

What does this mean? That we should not speak? No. We should speak with joy and conviction and passion. Only we should not crowd out other voices. There are always other voices to include. Always.

There have always been those who claim to be the only Voice. Imagine that! Each generation has those who presume to be sole proprietors of Truth, who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge and include others who speak for the Spirit, who hold inquisitions, who march into war with "God with us" written on their uniforms, who excommunicate, intimidate and drive out others, who hoot, jeer and shout down. Each generation.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "God created us in his own image; and we decided to return the favor."

Truth is not the sole possession of anyone, any of us.

The words of two people, Isaiah and Paul, reflect this spirit.

The holy city, Jerusalem, and the temple had been destroyed. God's people were living as captives in a foreign land, Babylon. The people were tired, beaten, and without hope. Life was hard and getting harder. And they saw no signs of reversal. It was to these downtrodden and broken people that Isaiah proclaimed:

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you*

*shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hand.*

The prophet was saying that they would be free, that there was hope! Yet the people could not imagine this as a possibility. To their interpretive system, this would be as impossible as water flowing uphill.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are my ways your ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Isaiah, speaking in behalf of God, says, “Look, you are captives, alright. In more ways than one. It is because you have mistaken your own thoughts and ways for the thoughts and ways of God that you cannot hear the liberating message. Even though it is beyond our imagination, there are incredible possibilities with God. Have confidence, people!”

The prophet was saying that we don’t have to know everything about everything to have assurance and live in hope. In fact, it gets in the way. The prophet himself has not sure knowledge of the future. A prophet is not so much a predictor of future events as a proclaimer of the timeless truths of God. In fact, a great deal of what Isaiah proclaimed was not fulfilled exactly as he said it would be. For example, Israel’s return home was not a triumphant procession through a desert transformed into a garden.

So you see, the fulfillment may be different, even from what the prophet led the people to expect. But that does not mean that fulfillment will not come at all.

In Paul’s words we find this same spirit. He said that prophecies and knowledge “will pass away.” They are imperfect and fragmentary. He said,

*Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then, face to face...Now I understand in part,
then I shall understand fully...Even as I have been fully understood.*

Paul affirms the difference between being human and being God, between the Creator and the creatures. To be a creature is to see dimly and to only understand in part, not to know everything about everything. Nevertheless, even though dimly, we *do* see. And even though partially, we *do* understand. We are not completely blind to God or ignorant of the truth. Reinhold Niebuhr once said that just because we cannot know absolutely doesn’t mean we still can’t know some things about the Absolute.

Many people have said this, and I think it is true: the biblical idea of faith is not “belief *that*,” but more like “faith *in*.” It is not so much an affirmation that something is factual as it is an expression of dedication or loyalty.

In a recent book, Harvey Cox talks about this difference between “faith” and “belief.” He wrote that Christianity started out with the Age of Faith, concerned with following the teachings of Jesus. Here faith was “hope and assurance in the dawning of a new era of freedom, healing and compassion.” This changed, however, into a focus upon creeds and correct doctrine in what he calls the Age of Belief. Faith *in* Jesus was replaced with tents *about* Jesus. Faith, Cox says, was replaced by belief, by cognitive assent to propositions.

I was reminded of a great quote from Albert Einstein, a man of worldly spirituality:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious...[The one] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.

A faith with too much certainty, without mystery, it seems to me, is not faith at all and leads to despair, to “a snuffed out candle.”

It was also Einstein who said,

Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.

Mystery and knowledge lead to each other. Feed each other. The more you know, the more you realize what you don’t know. The larger the body of knowledge, the larger the shoreline of mystery. And I’m not talking about just a little mystery around the edges, but that vast, immense and unfathomable mystery at the depth of all being.

South American writer, Eduardo Galeano, wrote:

*They gave him a seashell: “So you’ll learn to love the water.”
They opened a cage and let a bird go free: “So you’ll learn to love the air.”
They gave him a geranium: “So you’ll learn to love the earth.”
And they gave him a little bottle sealed up tight.
“Don’t ever, ever open it. So you’ll learn to love mystery.”*

Friends, let us learn to love mystery, love the questions, that we may find our true hope and faith.