

COMFORT AND ANGST

In dwelling in these verses, I find great comfort and also troubling angst at the same time. And some part of me says “I must be on the right track,” since that dual tension seems to mirror what I experience almost every day in seminary as I try to live out this Christian life into which I have been called ... lots of comfort and lots of angst.

We will come back to our scripture passage this morning in a bit. I thought I would talk a little about some of the areas that keep bubbling up for me that are another reflection of the comfort and angst I experience when it comes to wanting to be a follower of Jesus. I wonder if these things are happening for you as well?

I started Seminary in March of 2015, so I am approximately two-thirds of the way to completion of my Masters of Divinity. It’s interesting when someone finds out I’m in seminary and to hear their advice for me. One of the more repeated comments goes something like this: *“Okay, when you finish seminary, don’t get up to preach and tell us a whole bunch of big words or use a bunch of Hebrew and Greek words to try to impress us with how smart you are. That’s just showing off.”*

Well, I suppose that might be true ... sometimes. But the goal of learning all these things in seminary is to help us understand more about God and our lives in relationship – our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. If it were so simple, would we really need to learn all of these things, and would we really need all the books that have been written and all the commentaries explaining the Bible and all the sermons preached Sunday after Sunday and all the teaching events and on and on and on?

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus says the following (with slight variations in each) when asked which is the greatest commandment in the law: *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ That is the greatest, the first commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Everything in the law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments.”* (Matthew 22:37-40)

So if it’s that simple and we all just go and do that, are we done here? Can we just go home? Oh, if it only worked that way. In seminary,

we spend a significant amount of time on church history and reading commentaries and learning from Christians who through the ages have struggled, just as we struggle, to understand and implement the high calling of being a follower of Jesus. We also spend a significant amount of time studying scripture and reading scripture. (Yes, studying and reading are different. Check our “We Recall.” It does not say we “read some portion of the scriptures each day”; it says we “*study* some portion of the scriptures each day.”) When I study the writings and interpretations of these Christians, I see more clearly the thoughts and understanding that led to the development of an orthodoxy and an orthopraxy that generally shapes and defines Christian orientation today.

Remember those folks who asked me not to use big words to try and show off? In case you cannot tell, I decided I would not take that advice ... at least not always. Sometimes to understand something more clearly, we need to wade into unexamined territory. We do not usually talk about orthodoxy and orthopraxy in our everyday lives, but they are important, I think, for us to move into greater understanding and application of the things we “think” we know.

Orthodoxy is defined as “right opinion,” and it refers to the adherence to correct or accepted creeds. For Christianity, it means “conforming to the Christian faith as represented in the creeds of the early church.”

Orthopraxy is defined as “correct conduct, both ethical and liturgical” and in many ways is an extension or application of orthodoxy.

To simplify: Orthodoxy = Correct belief
Orthopraxy = Correct behavior

These are the things we talk about *a lot* in seminary. But we all know that Christianity is not one huge monolithic unified structure with identical sets of beliefs and practices and application, right? According to the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, there are 217 denominations listed. You’ve got to be kidding me! It almost seems like every time someone has some slight disagreement in “correct belief” or “correct behavior,” we decide to take our marbles home and start a new denomination. Where is Rodney King when we need him? “Can’t we all just get along?”

One interesting thing to reflect upon is what we *say* we believe (that is, what we think our “orthodoxy” is) and what we *do* (what our “orthopraxy” is). None of this is simple or cut-and-dried in terms of understanding and application, but I want to use an example as an illustration. This is also not meant as a criticism, but as something on which we can reflect. Many times we sing hymn #550, “All Are Welcome,” from *Hymns for a Pilgrim People*. I really like this hymn; I think most of us do. Well, about a month ago we had a homeless man on our front lawn just prior to worship service. I went and chatted with him a bit – not really out of love and compassion, but to see if I could figure out if he was somebody with whom we should be concerned. After all, he could be crazy or dangerous and he had a big dog with him. He commented that he was really enjoying hearing the choir sing and the organ and piano playing. I told him we were having burgers after church and to get some food when it was ready. I did not invite him into worship. I have no idea if my assessment was “correct” or not, but it seemed to me he was pretty harmless. Others were more “nervous” about him than I was, and they may have been correct. So the police were called and they questioned him and told him they had complaints that he was being a nuisance. The police did not chase him off, but after they left, he left on his own volition without getting any food.

So, my reflection, then and still today, is do I believe that “all are welcome” or not? We say (and sing) one thing, and we do something else. This is an example of a seemingly simple encounter with endless variations and dimensions of nuance for contemplation. There is no hard and fast rule by which we should behave that we can apply universally across the board. And that, for me, is an illustration of the angst that often bubbles up when these uncomfortable and unwieldy situations present themselves. Personally, I felt pretty good about my attempt to be “decent” to this man. And I felt pretty uncomfortable with my own prejudices and fear regarding my feelings about a homeless man with a big dog lying on the front lawn of the church as the worship service was about to begin. Without needing a concrete solution, I think that “comfort and angst” is a great place for me to be.

In seminary, along with all the study and interpretation and writing, there are wonderful little “tips” of things to consider when contemplating becoming a pastor and also in watching and learning how others pastor churches. One of the tips to look for when looking at other churches and looking at biblical commentaries is how the

pastor or church or commentary deals with “difficult passages of the Bible.” Generally, the advice to us seminarians is: if these things are never discussed, taught or reflected upon, or in commentaries are skipped or glossed over, run for the hills.

Well, for me, today’s scripture reading is one of those “hard passages of the Bible.” It is hard for me, because I do not interpret this passage in what would be called an “orthodox perspective.” Remember, orthodoxy is “correct belief,” which means, in my seminary setting, my interpretation would be considered “incorrect belief.” And believe me, the pressure to conform to “orthodoxy” is subtle and profound, for in the minds of Christians who conform to the “correct belief” mentality, the consequences of *incorrect* belief are a big deal – a *very* big deal ... an eternal deal. And so my challenge personally is to understand that perspective without dismissing those holding that viewpoint and without compromising what I consider to be my faithful perspective and understanding.

What I also find interesting is to contemplate our geographic and demographic religious environment. Obviously, in our area and culture there are a significant number of people who do not care one iota about church and religion. Some might be atheist. Some agnostic. Some just have “no need.” And some might be that great twentieth-century euphemistic declaration of “spiritual, but not religious.” However, despite that truth, for those who *are* religious, we live in an area that is religiously dominated by a four-“megachurch” setting that draws about 50,000 people weekly.

Two parenthetical asides, and then we will get back to scripture, I promise. The first has to do with the orthodoxy and orthopraxy dilemma as illustrated by these megachurches. Obviously there is much they are doing well to reach and touch and help many in their Christian walk. But I also know that if you scratch the surface a bit and look at how they, as organizations, live out their “orthodoxy” or correct belief, then all of these churches hold to the belief that a woman cannot hold a senior pastor leadership position. (This could take us into a whole long commentary about how much theology matters, but I will refrain for now.) What baffles me is how any woman – no, check that – any *person* with a feminist bone in their body or a feminist thought in their head can support such an organization.

The institutional repression of women that occurs because of such “correct belief” is more real than most of us ever realize. I am in seminary with a lot of women who work or have worked at these churches, and I will tell you that to a person, they are negatively affected in almost every case and traumatized in many cases. This kind of orthodoxy without critical examination is the type of orthodoxy that many have used to justify misogyny and slavery and oppression of many people on religious grounds for almost two millennium. You might think these are trifling details that do not matter very much. If so, consider that one of the largest seminaries in the United States had a policy in place as few as twenty years ago that not only was the policy of the seminary, but had board approval to enforce this policy. The policy was that the seminary had the authority and approval to actively thwart and block the academic career advancement of ANY person who held to a position that a woman could be a senior pastor of a church. The pressure to conform to orthodoxy is enormous. I would LOVE to do a discussion gathering on this topic sometime.

My second parenthetical comment is a little more light-hearted, but not less important. When having lunch with a friend this week, I found it interesting that he was talking about other churches he has attended or been exposed to and he said, “These other churches sure seem to talk about the second coming of Christ a lot. What’s your sermon about this Sunday?” Well, here we are ... second coming revisited? Well, that leads us right back to consideration of our scripture passage for today.

The “angst” portion that bubbles up in contemplating these verses has much to do with the seeming contradiction and inaccuracy of the scripture as translated into contemporary English. Even considering translational variations, the meaning does not change significantly in describing the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory. Some Christian traditions read this literally and factually; other traditions read this metaphorically. But no matter how these passages are interpreted, Jesus has been recorded as telling us he will be coming again with “power and great glory.” In addition, Jesus has told us the “signs” preceding his return are as easy to read as watching a fig tree’s leaves start to grow, which tells us summer is around the corner. In addition, Jesus tells us that the present generation will live to see the fulfillment of the return. Reading that, I feel the angst in my soul saying, “But that did not happen.” Was Jesus wrong? What happened?

I have read many biblical commentaries about the ways this seeming separation of prophecy and fact can be reconciled, and some of them even make some sense. Three versions postulated:

1. Jesus was wrong. In his humanity, his knowledge and understanding were limited and finite. This is hard to swallow for someone as spiritually connected as Jesus was.
2. Jesus said something “like” what was recorded, but it was written down and translated incorrectly. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is reported as saying *“Truly I tell you: there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.”* (Mark 9:1) That did come true. Could Matthew have written it down incorrectly? This is a little easier to accept than the first version.
3. The things that Jesus says the present generation will live to see come to pass refer not to the coming of the Son of Man, but to the opening reference of Matthew’s chapter 24 – namely, the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem.

There are many other interpretive variations that are postulated by biblical scholars and commentators, but I come away at the end of reading all of them unconvinced about the true facts of any of the interpretations and unable to claim a truth revealed to me personally. And therein lies the rub, I think. I have often confused “facts” with “truth,” and they are not interchangeable.

It is a “fact” that I am married to Kathy and we have four children – Kasey, Conley, Stephen and Kendall. I can prove it by showing you their pictures and maybe even introducing you to them someday. It is a fact that the height of our children is as follows: Kasey is 6 feet, Conley is 6 feet 4 inches, Stephen is 6 feet 3½ inches, and Kendall is 6 feet 4½ inches.

It is a “truth” that I love Kathy, Kasey, Conley, Stephen and Kendall. But I cannot prove this love in any factually demonstrable way. A million facts can never add up to a single truth.

In 1953, Ernest Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. He was being asked about the symbolism in the book and what the characters represented, and he gave an interesting response worth considering in light of our conversation today. Hemingway said: “No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in.... I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea, and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them *good and true enough*, they would mean many things.” (“An American Storyteller,” *TIME* Magazine, July 7, 1999 (emphasis added).)

Am I going to spend my life looking for the signs and the “facts” regarding the coming passing away of heaven and earth, or am I going to live my life in the “truth” of a redeemed life in service to the eschatological truth revealed by Jesus?

Jesus assures us that God is not abandoning the world, no matter how much evil exists. God is working toward both judgment and a new creation, and that is a great comfort and a great encouragement.

And I am also encouraged by the freedom given by Jesus about the “when”: it is none of my business.

Jesus says: “*Yet about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son; no one but the Father alone.*” If Jesus does not know and if the angels do not know, I might as well just drop the subject, at least as it pertains to timing. And that is freedom and great comfort to allow me to focus on living the life to which I have been called by Christ. What will that life look like?

Remember that wife I said I love? In October of this year, Kathy and I led a confirmation retreat for eleven high school students, including our own 15-year-old daughter Kendall. We went to Catalina for a weekend and the theme was “*The Faith Journey Continues.*” This retreat was the culmination of a one-year confirmation process. Kathy and I wanted to encourage our youth to recognize that this demarcation point was not an end, but a reflection point for continuing faith formation.

On Saturday evening, after we had a full day of teaching and experiential worship and prayer and contemplation, we launched an exercise to write a personal “testimonial.” We created a “Testimonial Banquet” table. Each person was given a “prompt” sheet (a copy

follows this sermon) with the following instructions: “Pretend that 50 years have passed from today. You are about 65 years old. What would you like others to say about you when most of your life is over? How would you like others to remember you? What legacy would you like to leave behind? Here is an opportunity to write your own testimonial in words you would want another to say about you.”

There were four prompts regarding hopes and goals, accomplishments, important contributions and a summation statement about their life, and they took twenty minutes to pray about and write their own testimonials. Then the papers were distributed among the youth and each person read aloud another person’s testimonial that they had written about themselves. What transpired was unexpected on several levels.

First, the kids started acting very silly and apprehensive about having someone else read the testimonials they had written. They were agitated, fidgety, embarrassed, more sarcastic and unfocused. Kathy and I and the other adult leaders allowed this to go on for some time, but tried to retain a sense of reverence and thankfulness for the vulnerability and honesty with which they shared. At the end of the sharing, we broke into gender-based groups to talk about this experience. The depth of the sharing was at a deeper level than I think we had ever experienced before, and when we gathered together again as a group with boys and girls together again, there was a change in the group. There was a depth of connection, a trust and shared vulnerability, and a profound appreciation for each person in the group by all of the others in the group at a level that had not been experienced before. And that depth of connection was founded and based on a testimonial life declaration based on God’s call on their lives.

I have heard it said that it is far easier for us to share our failures and our sin than it is to claim our strength and successes. The initial reaction of the youth to this exercise supports this statement completely. However, once the “angst” of this experience had passed, the “comfort” of the bond of trust and appreciation of each other was stronger than ever. This group meets weekly, and the depth of bond and connection has only continued to deepen. This is not a fact I can prove, but I can tell you without a doubt it is a “truth.”

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Is there a second coming of Christ? Well, I believe there already has been – in his resurrection. And the presence and coming of Christ continues each and every day we invite and allow it to occur. As for the comfort and angst? I will live with the angst and be comforted by the peace of the love given to us.

Jesus tells us that *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* We are touched by words. We are called by words. We express and communicate by words. Are Jesus’ words our words? You have a fantastic life in Christ ahead of you, no matter your age, for God’s purpose always awaits our awareness and acceptance and action. What will be the life you live into?

Write your own “Testimonial Banquet” speech. Find someone to read it aloud back to you ... and may your words and the words of Jesus be joined in truth ... for all eternity.

Amen.