

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Nonbinary Faith

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Clean. Unclean. Pure. Impure. Right. Wrong. Good. Evil. It seems almost as if humanity's default approach to the world is a binary one. This reality always surprises me since our ability to understand nuance and complexity is one of our major evolutionary advantages. But then I am reminded by neuroscientists that the human brain is fundamentally lazy. And then it all makes sense.

Our ability to compare, contrast, and categorize is something we start exercising early on in life. Wander down around our preschool rooms in church and you will find all sorts of toys and posters that emphasize this skill. We teach our kids about opposites from an early age: up/down, over/under, left/right. We encourage them to sort items, we've even designed toys to strengthen this ability – round peg goes in round hole. This all makes good sense too! We start with easy to contrast things as we learn about comparing and categorizing since that's what we can handle at age 2 or 3. But we're supposed to build on that skill! We are meant to move from simple, binary sorts of comparing and contrasting, to greater levels of complexity and nuance. We were not created to stay at the maturity level of a 5-year-old!

Yet the temptation to stay at that level is so great, isn't it? We often default to simple binaries because it's easy. And, as neuroscience is increasingly finding, the human brain is lazy! Or...a somewhat kinder construction...the human brain seeks efficiencies. When we experience something new, we compare that "new thing" to "familiar things" and look for similarities. Once we find something that seems pretty similar to the "new thing," then we treat "new thing" the way we would "similar old thing." Efficient! But also problematic!

This lazy tendency (or efficiency if you prefer) can get us into all sorts of trouble. It is the root cause of unconscious bias for instance. Here in America, as an example, we have internalized all sorts of white supremacist messages. Those unconscious biases lead us to categorize entire groups of people in unfair and unkind ways; they also impact how we treat individual members of those groups in some awful ways. For

more on this check out the VA Synod's Tapestry Team¹, they offer all sorts of resources to help us address unconscious bias and internalized racism.

Unconscious bias. Binary worldviews. What does this have to do with eating and the Pharisees? Well, everything actually! The Pharisees were known for their adamant adherence to the Law (as only they interpreted it). Their worldview, their theology, was exceedingly binary. And along come Jesus to destroy this worldview, speaking out for complexity and nuance. Calling out blind adherence to rules and traditions as detrimental to righteousness. And instead pointing his followers to mirror-work, the self-reflection necessary for deeper self-understanding.

Jesus wants us to go deeper into ourselves. He is inviting us to explore our motivations. "It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..."² indeed! It is from our hearts that all our intentions come. Are we willing to do the work of learning our hearts? We are being asked to slow ourselves down and examine why we do the things we do. Will we? Can we? Jesus is inviting us to walk his Way, his Way of intentional and loving response as opposed to thoughtless reaction grounded in unconscious, (and often) binary biases.

The Pharisees understand that people are either clean or unclean. And that is the extent of their thought and argument in our reading today. "Eating with clean hands = good," "eating with unclean hands = bad" therefore "Jesus' disciples = bad." No thought given as to why they believe that binary (tradition!!). No interest in the context that led to the current circumstance (e.g. a lack of clean water). And certainly no compassion towards the basic dignity of the people being judged (they're hungry? too bad!).

Jesus makes this explicitly clear in the verses left out of our reading, verses 9-14, in which he points out the hypocrisy the binary worldview of the Pharisees results in. Their binary faith means that honoring mother and father with their words is all that is necessary to keep the 4th commandment. Never mind supporting, caring for, and loving them, that's too much work! No, in their binary faith, all that's necessary are kind words.

Again and again in the Gospels, Jesus fights against simple, binary thinking. Again and again he acknowledges nuance and complexity, responding with intention and compassion to the people he encounters. Despite numerous opportunities (and human

¹ <https://vasynod.org/ministries/tapestry/>

² Mark 7:21 (NRSVUE)

encouragement) to do so, Jesus rarely judges those he meets. He resists the simple binary thinking that so many utilize to look down on others.

In a couple of weeks we will hear about Jesus welcoming the little children into his presence, defying the binary logic of his time that “children = less than” and “adults = greater than.” In John 4 his disciples will react with shock³ to find Jesus interacting with the Samaritan woman at the well. He simply isn’t interested in their “foreign woman = suspect” binary attitude. He expands the interpretation of the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount to combat binary thinking, teaching that adultery and murder are more than just do or do not.⁴

Despite the example of Christ, and despite his explicit teachings on all of this, we are still so prone to binary thinking. That lazy (or efficient) tendency of our brains to take shortcuts is too tempting! No wonder Jesus so consistently challenges our typical ways of thinking! He knows what our default is! He knows us better than we know ourselves!

So the Spirit prompts Mary to sing of the reversal of things, lifting the lowly and bringing down the powerful. Christ is born, not in the grand halls of a palace, but in a lowly animal stall in a tiny and unimportant village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. Jesus takes simple bread and wine and provides a life-ensuring meal. We are shown, again and again, how small and limited our binary worldview is. We are invited, again and again, into a deeper and more real faith. One that doesn’t fall apart when binaries do.

That’s the other problem with a binary worldview, they’re rather fragile, aren’t they? One tiny difference or discrepancy can bring the entire thing down. We can see this at play when Nicodemus visits Jesus in John 3. Christ’s teaching about being born from above and being born of the Spirit simply doesn’t fit Nicodemus’ binary understanding of birth or flesh and spirit. So he leaves that encounter with Christ more confused than ever, with his binary worldview shaking.

Maybe that should be a clue for us. Whenever we think we know something for certain, we should probably reexamine our thinking on it. Especially if that thinking is based on a simple either/or binary! Walking the Way of Christ seems to preclude binary thinking, binary faith. Walking the Way of Christ means embracing nuance. It means having our worldviews challenged. It means doing the hard work of self-

³ John 4:27

⁴ Matthew 5:21-32

reflection. It means exploring our motivations. It means being unsatisfied with easy answers. It means living a nonbinary faith. Amen.