

People of the Paradox
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture—Hebrews 4:12-16

According to Webster's Dictionary, a paradox is "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true."

We get the word paradox from its roots in Greek and, later, Latin—*para*, meaning beside or beyond or contrary to, and *dokien*, the Greek for 'to think.' In plain and simple English, a paradox is something that makes us pause and scratch our heads.

Now before I lose some of you right off the bat to thinking about your shopping list or today's Panthers' game, let me explain why I am starting this sermon like a graduate school class in dead languages. It seems to me that we have the privilege, or the curse, of walking this earth in times of great change.

Call it a societal shift or an upheaval or a jump ahead (we certainly hope not backward), but so many parts of our world are in the process of transformation all at once. Geopolitics, economics, societal beliefs, dramatic technological advancements and more.

It began decades ago and no one can be sure how long it may take. But for now we are neither minnow nor frog. We seem to be that thing in between that is not quite one or the other.

As thinkers and commentators struggle to make sense of our times, simple labels don't work any longer. More and more, they seem to be looking through the lens of paradox, scratching their heads and trying out new labels for this half-born era.

For example, some say what we're looking for is the "new normal", a reference to what the globalized, post-Cold War, post-Great Recession world will be like, if things ever settle down.

Others say we've moved into an era when things won't ever settle down. That is the claim in a recent article from the Harvard Business Review titled, "Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis."¹

¹ July/August 2009 Issue

Did you get that? A 'crisis' used to be a highly unusual, temporary moment when things were out of whack. Now, the Harvard folks are saying we need leaders who can lead in a 'permanent crisis', a paradoxical idea if there ever was one. They may be right. But it sounds exhausting.

The church is not immune, of course. Signs abound that organized religion is midway through its own transformation. For example, one recent survey of Americans found that more than two out of three of us believe in God and three out of four believe it's a parent's responsibility to give children a religious upbringing. All that sounds pretty good. But only 45% of the people surveyed called themselves religious and half rarely or never go to church. One in four people put themselves in a new category of 'spiritual but not religious.'

Those statistics present us with more than a few paradoxes, more than a few head scratchers. They paint a pretty blurry picture from which, with God's help, we must discern the future of the church.

Among other things, surveys like that underscore what one wise member of this congregation said to me this week—that church needs to be a place where people can come with their questions and their doubts. They need to be given time and programmatic opportunities to mold their faith and come to God on their terms.

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The good news—and, yes, there is always good news—is that we Christians ought to be comfortable with paradox. We claim our identity, after all, in God's grace, grace that stands in such sharp contrast to our behavior. We are, in that sense, people of *the* paradox. Witness the testimony we find in the four short verses from the book of Hebrews that make up our New Testament reading today.

As I noted last week, the book of Hebrews was written to an audience of first-century Christians who were showing signs of stress and fatigue under fire. Crestfallen that Christ had not already returned again to usher in a new age, these believers were finding out that ridicule and persecution come with claiming Christ as Lord and savior.

In chapter four, the author of Hebrews presents two claims about God. His words aren't smooth. They don't go down like baby food. They take some digestion. In fact, his two points in these verses seem to go in opposite directions.

First, he compares God's word and knowledge of us as sharper than any two-edged sword, one that pierces our very spirit, our very soul. Before God, we might as well be naked as we stand to render an account of our lives. So his first move is to remind his hearers that nothing we do escapes God's sight and anything and everything we do may bear some explanation when we come to see God face to face. For an audience of weary believers, it is, admittedly, a tough-love approach by the preacher of Hebrews.

But, as with all of scripture, the message doesn't end there. Only a few words later, we are reminded that God came into the world in Jesus Christ and, through Christ, sympathizes with our weaknesses, who became flesh, walked this mortal plane and experienced its brokenness.

Ours, then, is a God who sees into our spirit and whose word can sever us limb from limb. Yet, in Christ, God has suffered for us and even now calls us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

How do we reconcile these seemingly contradicting possibilities? How do we make sense of this conflict of justice and mercy?

The truth is, we can't, using our very human understanding. It exceeds us. It is beyond our limited grasp. It is *the* paradox of all paradoxes and we are blessed to rest in its mystery.

John Burgess, a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, describes our merciful dilemma as one of living under God's gracious judgment and judging grace. It is, he says, an invitation to be in relationship with God, to confess to others in one and the same breath that we fall short of God's expectations every day yet God will not let us go.

To others who have yet to believe, I'm sure it must look pretty silly. To practice a faith that compels us to invest ourselves not in the immediate and visible ways of the world but in things that are invisible. To make ourselves weak in order to become strong. To suffer, knowing that is where we see God's glory more clearly. To take an apparatus that was meant for embarrassment and agony, the cross, and hold it high as our symbol of victory. To die to ourselves in order to live in God in Christ.

Even more silly, that we celebrate so oddly in the church. We sprinkle water on babies' heads and tell them they are completely cleansed. Nonsensical ritual, some would say. And we celebrate, yes, celebrate by reenacting Jesus' solemn goodbye dinner with his friends. We take bread, as Jesus did, ask God's blessing, break it and give it away.

Friends, in a moment, we will celebrate the promise of what God has in store for this church in the coming year. We will place a basket on the communion table and we will bring forth our pledges of time, talent and treasure.

Whatever you do, don't underestimate the importance of your actions. This isn't just pageantry. It is a response to God's call to us to live lives that are Eucharistic, which means to give thanks for God's grace because we surely will never figure it out. So, we celebrate the Eucharist with our very lives, by taking our lives and resources, asking for God's blessings on them, breaking parts off for others and giving those parts away.

When we do this, we claim our identity as the people of the paradox, that by giving parts of our ourselves away, we are made whole.

Thanks be to our God, and God's divine, paradoxical, nonsensical, head-scratching math, which says that by subtracting from ourselves God's kingdom grows and so do we. Amen.