

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – April 28, 2019
“Cognitive Dissonance”
Acts 5:27-32 and John 20:19-31

A woman once told me that she has struggled for decades with the parable of the prodigal son. When I asked her what was troubling to her about that passage, she told me that the father's actions, as described in that text, are simply not fair. She stated that it doesn't matter how many ministers have tried to explain that parable to her over the years, it was still easier for her to maintain her existing worldview about what is fair and what is not rather than accepting a scripture that is at odds with her core understanding of life. "If I know that the parable of the prodigal son is being discussed in worship," she told me, "then I won't be there."

Cognitive dissonance is a phrase that psychologists use to describe "a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors." These internal conflicts create a sort of wrestling in our brains. Ultimately, if we are to quell that tension, one or more of our beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors must be altered "to reduce the discomfort and restore balance." ¹

¹ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html>. Accessed on April 28, 2019.

The woman that I just mentioned rightly recognizes that Jesus' words and actions create cognitive dissonance within us. If we are truly paying attention as we read through the Gospels, then they are bound to make us uncomfortable. For stating her struggles so directly, I admire the woman's courage. But I also wonder if, in the process of trying to protect her core beliefs and shore up her worldview, she might also be unintentionally locking Jesus out.

In our second lesson this morning, the disciples are gathered behind locked doors. They rightly fear that they could be targeted in the same manner as Jesus who recently died on the cross. At this point, most of the disciples have already encountered the risen Lord. As the others share their stories, Thomas understandably feels hurt. In his mind, he has been left out. Soon, he begins to question the resurrection narrative that the rest proclaim saying, "unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

We soon learn, though, that the God of resurrection will not be deterred by an ordinary lock. Jesus enters the room unexpectedly, takes Thomas by the hand, and shows him his wounds. As one scholar notes, "Jesus is challenging Thomas and the other disciples to confront the wounds of their personal and collective life, instead

of trying to deny or hide them.”² It’s reminiscent of “healing circles for veteran groups, in which wounds are the very purpose for gathering.”³

Many of the things that Jesus did surprised his disciples. Despite walking with him daily, they struggled to understand how he could be both Lord and king, as well as a suffering Savior. So when Jesus spoke about how he was to be killed, Peter famously rebuked him saying, "this will never happen to you, Lord." And yet, it did.

Holy Week demonstrated how Peter's inner wrestling was never quite resolved. As Jesus prepared to wash the disciple’s feet, it was that same, outspoken disciple who was once again quick to object, saying "No, Lord. You shall never wash my feet." Jesus, though, was undeterred. He calmly explained that while his actions might be hard to understand in the moment, it would all become clear in time. Jesus then poured water into the basin and used his outer robe as a towel, demonstrating what it means to be a servant Lord.

Peter's cognitive dissonance was this. Though he believed that Jesus was Lord, his own view of what a Lord was did not include the washing of the disciples feet or

² Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Second Sunday of Easter, Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2*, Ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 214.

³ *Ibid.*, 214.

dying on a cross. So when Jesus said that these things must happen, it created a tension in Peter's brain. He assumed that Jesus must be mistaken about these things because they didn't fit with his own view of what a Lord was.

Next, by arguing with Jesus, and seeking to convince him to come around to Peter's side, the disciple hoped to relieve this tension in his brain. Jesus, though, rarely provided his followers with the desired resolution. And if Peter was to go forth as one of Jesus' disciples, he would be forced to alter his core convictions about what a Lord really is by permitting Jesus to wash his feet and join him on the journey to the cross.

On Thursday, a group of five-year-old children were walking from the playground behind the church back to the YMCA daycare which is housed here at Westminster. When their teacher finished lining them up on the sidewalk, I stopped to speak with the students. I told them that I hope they have a good day, and I let them know how glad we are that they are here at the church. One of the boys remembered me from a previous conversation and said, "You have a son named Liam, don't you?" "That's right," I said. "And I have another son named Nathan," I continued. "But, he's only three and you guys are way bigger than him."

When a dog passed by on the street, they all told me about their pets. I told them that I have a dog. And once we had broken the ice, they got down to more serious business. “What’s your job?” one of them asked. “I am the pastor here,” I told them. “What’s that?” one of the children responded. “Well,” I said, “I preach sermons here,” gesturing toward the sanctuary. “I visit people who are sick. I teach classes.”

One of the boys was catching on. He stood slack-jawed, leaned in, and asked, “Do you KNOW God?” His eyes were the size of dinner plates, and it was clear that if I have ever communicated with the divine, then he wanted to know all about it. When I told him and his classmates that “I do my best to know God,” they seemed perplexed, and decidedly less impressed.

It all reminded me of a scene in the Irish film, “Waking Ned Devine,” where a Roman Catholic priest is speaking with a boy named Maurice. The boy asks,

“Did you see him? You know, Jesus.”

The priest responds, “Well, not exactly, no.”

“But... you're working for him,” the boy challenges.

“I am doing the best I can,” the priest tells him. Say Maurice, “do you think that you could ever be drawn to working for the church?”

“No.” the boy states flatly. “I don't think I could work for someone I'd never met.”⁴

Our lives are full of these tensions. We long to know God, but often on our own terms, and we are constantly looking for a sign. The good news for us is that God will not be deterred by our doubts, our fears, our hesitations with scripture, or the locked doors that we place between ourselves and the divine. You see, our God is boundlessly imaginative and resourceful. And when our tensions are at their most pronounced, God speaks a word of peace. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/waking-ned-devine-script.html. Accessed on April 26, 2019.