

Miranda Andersen

Sunday, September 13, 2009

“Not about you, all about you.”

I'll repeat that again: “not about you, all about you.” Sounds a bit like of a paradox, doesn't it? A paradox by definition is “a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth.” But isn't this how Christianity functions? Isn't Christianity in itself a paradox?

When I first looked at the scripture for today, I didn't know what to do. There were two different stories. How was I supposed to preach on two stories that seemed to lack any sort of cohesion? But as I read it again, not only for a second but a third, even a fourth time, things began to fall into place. “Not about you, all about you” is ironically true and it perfectly illustrates the Christian faith.

The text for today shows us not only two different sides of Peter but of Jesus as well. The first illustration has Jesus asking his disciples who others think he is. They answered him, but Jesus goes a step further and asks for a personal confession: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter then says he is the Messiah and Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone.

Notice how Jesus never answers his question himself. He doesn't correct or affirm his disciples when they say he is a prophet or when Peter declares him to be the Messiah. He also tells his disciples not to tell anyone. This has always flabbergasted me because this is not the first, nor the last time that something like this occurs. Jesus is often telling people to stay quiet about who he is or what he has done. Why? I never have been able to determine if he is telling them to be quiet because he honestly wants them to be quiet, or if he's telling them to be quiet, knowing that will only make them want to go tell others more. Who knows. Maybe it's just one of life's unanswerable questions.

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Regardless, what Jesus is illustrating here is the need for a *personal confession*. By asking his disciples who they think he is, he is requiring them to make the decision themselves, not based on the opinions of others. Here is an instance when it's all about you. This resonates with Jesus' character that is portrayed throughout a majority of the New Testament. Jesus rarely makes his own assertion about who he is and rather plays off of what others say.

Even in the passion narrative found in all four gospels, Jesus is depicted as staying relatively quiet. He doesn't (vocally) come to his own defense. In Matthew, one of the few times he speaks up for himself, Pilate asks him if he is the King of the Jews, and Jesus simply responds by saying, "You say so" (Matthew 27:11). Even this declaration is a vague one. For many it would hardly seem convincing. And as frustrating as this may be, this is the Jesus we know and find in the New Testament. Only in the book of John, where we find several "I am" statements, do we truly see an assertive Jesus. Otherwise, he's fairly passive when it comes to who he is.

However, there are many dangers to this "personal confession." We can't make Jesus into who we *want* him to be. There would be so many Jesus' floating around we wouldn't know what to do with them all! But at the same time, there needs to be that personal confession that Jesus is the Messiah. We need to believe it in our hearts. It can't just be something that is done nonchalantly because everyone else is doing it. It needs to be a heartfelt confession declaring Jesus as the Messiah, as a personal savior. Jesus is who we need him to be.

Jesus then proceeds to teach how the Son of Man must go through much suffering. Peter doesn't like this declaration and wants to have a one-on-one with Jesus. Here I almost see Peter as a publicist taking his client aside: "Hey, Jesus...I hate to break it to you, but this might not be so hot for the image. Mind toning it down a bit?" The key element is to remember that Peter took Jesus aside for this conversation. He wanted to keep things personal, maybe on the DL.

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Remember how I just said personal confession is an important part of Christianity? Jesus throws this idea completely out the window. Instead of keeping the conversation between himself and Peter, Jesus exclaims, (in what I can only imagine to be a loud, booming voice) “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He takes this encounter from being between only himself and Peter (personal) back to the entire group of disciples (communal). Here is an example of it being not about you.

It is important to remember that Christianity is not only a personal faith, but a communal faith as well. Too often we become wrapped up in what we want, not what the Christian community needs. Christianity can't be all about the black or the white. Instead, there has to be a healthy combination of the two that creates a gray that is neither dull nor boring but vibrant and exhilarating.

Peter's rebuke also brings up another aspect of Christianity that is often disregarded: the cross. Sure, we all know that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but is it an ever-present aspect of our faith? It should be. Just like Christianity cannot be whole without both personal and communal confessions, it also cannot properly function without the cross and the resurrection. What's the point of the resurrection without the cross? What's the point of the cross without the resurrection? When Peter rebukes what Jesus is teaching them, he is essentially echoing what many of us think: “We've had enough of the cross. Let's just move onto biblical teachings.” But that's just it! The cross is biblical and an essential part of Christianity that should not be ignored. We may want the happy, PG rated Christianity, but we must be willing to take the whole package, much like we must be willing to take a personal and communal confession about who Jesus is. Without these elements, Christianity is nothing. The cross provides us with a connection not only with God but with the community of believers as well.

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Much like the disciples, as followers of Christ we rarely get things right. We are doing too little of one thing or not enough of another, we don't realize that the answer is often right in front of us and complicate issues more than they need to be. But even in our mistakes, there is good news.

When Jesus rebukes Peter, he doesn't say that Peter can no longer follow him. Jesus realizes that we're not going to get it. His disciples, those who were closest to him and heard him preach and saw him heal rarely got what Jesus was doing or saying. More often than not they were clueless, but they continued to follow him and Jesus let them. They asserted what they could and left the rest to what we might call "blind faith." Once again, there is a dichotomy that must be seen as equal parts, not one triumphing over the other. We need not only blind faith, but also reason, personal and communal confession, the cross and the resurrection.

At the end of this text, Jesus prescribes what it takes to be a follower and offers yet another paradox: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Losing your life in order to save it? On what planet does that compute?

Once again, I turn to the idea of "happy" Christianity, or in this case, "easy" or "safe" Christianity. I know there are many individuals who believe that Christianity is easy, and once you're in, you're in. Here Jesus talks about taking up our crosses and following him. That's some serious business right there and something that shouldn't be taken lightly. It's a huge commitment, and one for many that has proven to be a dangerous, even a life-threatening one.

One of my favorite verses comes from the book of John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Christianity is often asking you to give up what is most important in order to help others. After Jesus answers the Pharisees' question about

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which is the greatest commandment, he follows with another that is similar: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). We are supposed to love our enemies, not hate them.

Christianity is all about getting us outside of our comfort zones and looking out for others instead of ourselves. It’s all about being uncomfortable in a community where there seems to be no right answers. Sounds like my kind of party!

“Not about you, all about you.”

This sentence shouldn’t make any more sense to you than when I first began this sermon. But I also hope it hasn’t made you more confused, either. I hope and pray that you still have questions. Fight with what it means to not have a black and white faith, rejoice in the freedom and restriction that it brings. Constantly question, but always remember that element of “blind faith.” Remember that there is no such thing as a “right” answer, only “right” questions. Dare to be uncomfortable and dare to live out your faith. Amen.