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Living Between Life's Polarities

Matthew 12: 30; Luke 9: 49-50; Matthew 10:16

The great journalist and Christian thinker G. K. Chesterton once noted that if an alien creature examined the external features of a human body he would rightly note that we have two arms and two hands, two legs and two feet, two ears and two eyes.

On the basis of that observation the alien creature might conclude that we have two hearts.

Just when the alien's observation would seem to be mostly right, it would be all wrong!

Chesterton's point was that subtlety and discretion are required to understand life rightly.

Consistency is a virtue. But it is dangerous virtue.

There are times when the wise person realizes that *inconsistency* is the only proper course.

Ralph Emerson declared, "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Our Lord had no little mind.

Matthew's Gospel gives us a picture of Jesus clearly declaring to his opponents,

"He who is not with me is against me." Luke presents us with Jesus affirming exactly the opposite position.

The disciples tell him of an encounter they had with an unknown exorcist, and they testify

to their purity and zeal: "We told him to stop healing in your name, since he doesn't follow us."

Jesus replies, "Don't stop him, for he who is not against you is for you." Hmm.

Such juxtapositions move some critics to say, "You can use the Bible to believe anything.

The Scriptures are illogical, a frankly contradictory document.

Place those two statements side by side and you must concede they are absolute contradictions:

'He who is not with me is against me,' cannot be reconciled with 'He who is not against you is for you.'

Only one statement can be right, which means the other must be wrong." So goes the reasoning.

Our Lord says, No.

The challenge of the mature spiritual life requires us to display flexibility of temperament

and to frankly recognize and appreciate that truth is experienced within polarities.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed that the test of a first-rate intelligence was to

"hold two opposing ideas in tension at the same time." A first-rate faith must often pass the same test: pursuing truth effectively in a complex world sometimes requires a willingness to live within polarities.

The truth may can be found at one pole or another – or perhaps somewhere between the two.

Our Lord did indeed say, "He who is not with me is against me." But in what context?

Our Lord was a bold, dramatic teacher, who often disturbed his hearers and embroiled his ministry in conflict.

Even his great acts of healing were not universally celebrated as examples of God's transforming power, but inspired charges against our Lord that his healing strength was actually demonic in nature.

When the fundamental nature of our Lord's ministry was being questioned, he naturally spoke unequivocally:

"Why would I be going around doing good and defeating the demonic powers if I was in league with them?

Why would I be going around casting out evil spirits, if I was oriented toward the destructive?"

With the very integrity of his ministry at stake, our Lord spoke in stark and vivid terms:

The Kingdom of God is oriented around good.

If you are not working toward the Kingdom of God with us, then you are against us.

In the matter of ultimate commitment to God's Kingdom there can be no middle ground.

On the other hand, Luke presents us with a very different scene. Here Jesus is not engaged in any fierce debate with religious authorities contesting the nature of his ministry. He is engaged in private discussion with his disciples, trying to teach them insight into the nature of God. The irony is, the disciples think they understand Jesus' perspective perfectly well. They have heard what he has said to the religious authorities. So they talk proudly of their encounter with an unknown exorcist who was healing people in Jesus' name. They said, "We remembered what you said, and we told him to stop. Because we remembered that you said, 'He who is not with us is against us.'" Naturally, the disciples are expecting Jesus' praise. Instead our Lord says, "You don't really understand, do you? What was this man doing? He was going around doing good. He was improving people's lives, releasing them from suffering. People were benefiting from his ministry. Sure, he may not be explicitly enlisted in our number, but he was healing people in my name. He is edging toward our Kingdom. Don't discourage him. Anyone who is improving people's lives is not against us, but for us."

Here is my point. People going around saying, "I want a simple faith. I want a child-like faith." Well, children ask questions. Children accept complexity. Jesus says, 'If you want a faith that matters, accept the fact that a mature faith Recognizes that truth is experienced paradoxically and experienced within polar tensions.' Our Lord wants us to see that a mature faith knows that, depending on the situation, truth can be found in affirming one pole or the other – or perhaps in finding a point somewhere between the two. The disciples think that they have Jesus figured out on this issue. They have heard what Jesus said to the religious authorities, and they think they have figured out his perspective. When they discouraged the unknown exorcist, the disciples thought they were acting on principle. They were; but they had applied the wrong principle. The right principle in this case was exactly the opposite of the principle they affirmed. A mature faith is a matter of flexibility, a matter of weighing polar truths and recognizing which principle is most applicable in this moment. Faith is not simple, because life is not simple. To meet the demands of a complex life we must craft a faith that is complex, too.

Our natural human tendency is to categorize events as good or bad. We tend to throw every event into one bin or another. But our Scripture reminds us, "For everything there is a season. That there is a time for every matter under heaven. There is a time for birth and a time for death; There is a time to build and a time to destroy; There is a time to plant and there is a time to harvest. There is a time to build up and there is a time to destroy. There is a time to mourn, as well as a time to laugh. There is a time for peace, and there is a time for war." We cannot always see the meaning or value of an event, but everything in the spectrum of creation has its place in the symmetry of God's creation. Every polarity has its function within the overall balance of life. Each polarity has its place. A mature faith recognizes that good and bad are not easily discerned but are experienced within the overall framework of God's providence.

I hearken back to G. K. Chesterton, that extraordinary journalist I cited earlier. By his own admission, Chesterton was a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen. This precocious genius began to read all of the atheistic, anti-Christian writers that he could find, thinking they would help justify his rejection of Christianity. By the end of his study he said of his so-called helpers, "Almost thou persuadest me to become a Christian." Why? Chesterton noted that Christianity had no shortage of critics. But the criticisms were wildly contradictory. Some critics charged that Christianity was militaristic and aggressive. Others said it was too pacifistic and passive. Some said that Christianity was too world-denying; others said it was too frankly materialistic. Some said that Christianity, with its focus on human sinfulness, was far too pessimistic about life. Others said that Christianity, with its description of humanity as "a little lower than the angels," was far too optimistic in its evaluation of human potential. The more Chesterton pondered the contradictory charges leveled at Christianity, the more it struck him that Christianity offered an extraordinarily nuanced and balanced belief, a faith of polarities and divergent emphases that produced very different kinds of Christians. It was a faith that could produce on the one hand a St. Augustine, and on the other, a St. Francis, a faith that could produce ascetic monks as well as cultures that erected ornate cathedrals, a faith that could produce Quaker pacifists like William Penn and military geniuses like Oliver Cromwell, a faith that could produce a mystic St. John of the Cross and a mystic like Joan of Arc. The more one contemplates the Christian faith and its polarities, the more one realizes that its complexity gives rise to all different kinds of Christians, a fact that must be mystifying to outsiders, yet remains one of our faith's eternal strengths. *In short, Christianity's ability to hold great and opposite truths in paradoxical tension is what makes our faith a unique way of worshipping God.*

Think about the claims that are made within our Holy Word. We proclaim, "Though your sins be as scarlet, God's grace can make them white as snow." Yet Christianity is aware of the strain of temptation that comes when one puts a reformed thief in charge of the cash register. Our faith proclaims, "I can do all things through Christ! On the other hand, we can exclaim with the prophet, "Wretched man that I am, who can deliver me from the body of death?" We proclaim that Christ can make all things new, yet we admit that often the good that we want to do we do not do, but the evil that we do not want to do, that is what we do. "The Lord is my shepherd," says the Psalmist on the one hand. Yet this same Psalmist can exclaim, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We are called as Christians to do all within our power to promote our health and extend our lives, yet there are times when we are called to lay down our life on behalf of a friend. The more Chesterton examined the paradoxes and polarities that defined the Christian experience, the more he came to realize that the Christian faith was as nuanced as a key, He realized that this key might just be the instrument that could unlock the meaning of the universe.

Our Lord said to us, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." To hold the virtues of those two creatures in mind requires complexity of belief. Martin Luther King translated this verse to mean, "Be strong-minded, but tender-hearted." However you translate it, it is a command to live in frank recognition of polar opposites, which is what we have to do when we try to apply our Christian ethics in a complex world.

How exactly does being tough-minded and soft-hearted work in the real world? I can tell you. Many years ago, when I was a seminary student, a well-meaning pastor gave me a project, a human project. My pastor friend thought I could be a good influence on a troubled young man and asked me to take him in as a housemate. Jim turned out to have several bad habits, the least objectionable of which was not paying his share of the rent. Jim also was an alcoholic who had a penchant for drinking, which he combined with a penchant for driving while he was drinking, a truly problematic habit, because Jim didn't own a car. In fact, he "borrowed" mine one night and wrecked it, while driving under the influence. Worse, he "borrowed" several other vehicles from owners who weren't nearly so understanding. I tried to do everything I could to help Jim. I was incredibly tender-hearted. I hauled him out of bars, I kept him out of jail, I advanced him money, I smoothed matters over with the police, I calmed down people whose cars he had "borrowed." I did everything I possibly could in an effort to go the second mile to transform his troubled life. But I finally realized if I was ever going truly to help him, I had to be strong-minded. My tender-heartedness was not doing Jim any good. If I was going to help him I had to shift my behavior from one pole to another. So I went from being completely involved in his life to cutting him completely off my support. I found a mission where he could stay; I helped him find a nearby job; I advanced him money – and I told him he was on his own. I lost touch with him soon thereafter. But I finally realized that not helping him was the only way I could help him. It was a costly lesson in teaching me that faith is not simple, that applying one's faith in a complex world often requires us to live within polarities.

Our Lord said, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."
In sum, our Lord calls us to stretch ourselves in our faith.
Some of us are naturally soft-hearted. Our Lord calls us to stretch ourselves and be tough-minded.
Some of us are naturally strong-minded, but our Lord calls us to stretch and be soft-hearted.
Faith is not simple, because life is not simple.
Faith is complex, because life is complex.
Sometimes the path we should take seems so clear,
and sometimes we see as through a dark glass,
working out our faith in fear and trembling.
But we know this: our God gives us a key,
and this key is capable of unlocking all of the nuances of life.

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