

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, on Sunday, September 28, 2008.

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Have you ever wondered why we have two candles on the altar? We might think that three candles would be more appropriate, one for each person of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). Or we might think that one candle is best, since we say in the Nicene Creed that we believe in ONE God. The problem is that an odd number of candles is harder to arrange. Two candles just looks better. But there is a theological explanation for the two candles as well. These two lights represent the two natures of Jesus Christ. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Jesus Christ was both man and God. We light the two candles to remind us that we believe in a savior who is not one thing or another but rather two things at once. Jesus is “both-and” not “either-or” and it is only a both-and savior who can lead us to freedom and salvation.

I am the first person to say that understanding Jesus Christ as both human and divine is extremely difficult. A lot of ink and a lot of blood has been spilled trying to sort out this conundrum of how anyone could be both fully human and fully God. But this morning's reading from Philippians tells us that Christ Jesus was in the form of God and in human form. And while the concept of Christ Jesus as both human and divine can be confusing, a savior who is both-and can also be a source of comfort and strength.

We are not the only ones who might be confused. In this morning's lesson from Matthew, Jesus is frustrating the Pharisees, the religious legal scholars of Jesus' day. Matthew loves to make the Pharisees look confused, and this morning's story is no exception. The Pharisees are concerned that Jesus has not gone through the proper channels. They want to know, by whose authority Jesus teaches and heals. Jesus says he will explain it if they can answer a simple question: “Did the Baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” The Pharisees argue amongst themselves. Either answer presents difficulties, and in the end they finally give up. “We don't know,” they say. Jesus refuses to reveal the source of his authority to them. I do not think Jesus is just being difficult to get along with. When Jesus asks the question, he frames it in terms of either-or. Either the Baptism of John was of human origin or it was divine. But I wonder if Jesus actually intended it to be a kind of trick question. Perhaps the answer is both-and. Perhaps the answer is not either one or the other but somehow both. And the Pharisees will not be able to understand Jesus' authority until they stop looking for an either-or solution.

We find ourselves stuck in either-or thinking all the time. We are constantly judging between two options that seem in opposition. Either you're a winner or a loser. Either you're for us or against us. Either you're smart or dumb. In or out. Black or white. Heavenly or earthly. Good or bad. Sinner or saved. And sometimes it is easy to decide. And sometimes it is impossible. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to sort things into categories, because categories are easy to understand. The problem is that categories do not always give the whole picture. We often try to put things in terms of right or wrong when the truth is somewhere in between. Or the truth is something else all together. Sometimes we do have to choose one side or another, but there are many times when we could perhaps see a third option, an option that includes both sides. We miss this third way, because we're so used to thinking in either-or terms. Here's an example. When a child misbehaves, a parent feels an immediate need to set the child straight. The parent may punish the child because the child is wrong and the parent knows better. But

sometimes the child is misbehaving simply because they are hungry or tired or they just don't understand. Instead of putting the child's behavior in terms of right or wrong, the parent begins to think in terms of how to both stop the bad behavior and take care of the child's needs. Both-and. The parent may then redirect the child into a more constructive activity or help the child articulate what they want. Like parents, we often find ourselves wanting to make someone else's behavior about right and wrong. And we end up punishing each other instead of finding ways to help each other get what we need.

Jesus gives us a way out of our either-or, categorical thinking, because Jesus Christ comes to us not as either human or God but as both. And it is through his nature as both human and divine that we are saved and set free. The letter from Philippians reminds us that Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus was not a sinner, but Jesus died in order that we sinners might live. Jesus showed us just how off track, how messed up we had become. He accepted the most humiliating punishment we could dish out. But through the power of his love, he showed us that death does not overcome God's love. Jesus lost his life in order that he might gain our lives. Jesus was not a winner or a loser, he was a human and divine savior. In recognition of what he showed us, we humble ourselves, we accept that we are sinners, we accept that we have lost our way. Then we take up the cross of repentance, and we win salvation by the grace of God. The way into the kingdom is not an either-or journey. It is a both-and journey. We are not either sinner or saved; we are both repentant sinners and we are saved by God's love. Like a parent correcting a child, Jesus came to redirect us from the ways of sin not by punishing us but by showing us a better way.

Sometimes it is hard to understand what a both-and journey looks like, so let me tell a story that I think illustrates the point. An soldier in the Israeli army was patrolling an area of occupied Palestine when all of a sudden he felt a stone strike him in the back. Whirling around, he prepared to fire his rifle. When he looked through the sight, he saw...children. Children hurling stones at him. The stone were coming close and he had to make a decision: either protect the children or protect himself. His finger shook on the trigger, and then suddenly he had an idea. Quickly, he put down his gun and picked up some of the stones from the ground and began...to juggle them! As he juggled the stones, the children's mouths dropped open and the stones dropped from their hands. They smiled and they cheered. For just as they had been taught to throw stones at soldiers they had also been taught to laugh at clowns. The soldier did one final trick, took a bow, and the children cheered. The soldier went over and told the children to stop throwing stones and then he went on his way.

I am under no illusion that this soldier solved the conflict between Israel and Palestine with his juggling. I am under no illusion that it fixed everything. But this act of finding a both-and solution, a creative and loving way of protecting both himself and the children reveals a window into God's kingdom.

When we can see a third way, a both-and way beyond the categories in which we have been trained to think, then we we can see the way into the kingdom. Where in our lives is a third way waiting to be discovered? Where in our lives is God inviting us to juggle, to see a situation that seems impossible in terms that lead to life and joy? Perhaps we feel stuck in a relationship because we find ourselves choosing between staying together and splitting apart. Is there a way to both acknowledge the brokenness and maintain the whole? These past couple of weeks, our

nation has been reeling from the shock that our financial systems are struggling. We are seeing changes and shifts that frighten us. As we hear our national leaders debate the appropriate response, we hear a lot of either-or talk, making statements about what is necessary in order to avoid complete meltdown. We must either succeed or fail. Either we recover or we collapse. I wonder if we are missing a both-and solution.

As individuals, we might find ourselves in difficult financial predicaments. These are frightening times for many people. It probably seems like the worst time to send out pledge cards in the mail. I hope we all have received them. In the letters that went with the cards, we were all encouraged to pledge and even consider increasing our giving to the church, since 2009 will bring some financial challenges. Some of us might be thinking, "If I increase my financial giving to the church then I won't be able to make ends meet." "Either I'm going to give more and not feel okay about my financial picture or I'm going to give the same or less and feel more secure." These are real concerns, and I do not want to suggest that the answers are easy. I know we all want to do the best we can given our individual situations. At the same time, I do want to encourage us to look for both-and solutions. Is there a way to both gladly give of what we have been given and at the same time honor our other financial commitments? Is there a way to both joyfully honor God who gives us so much while at the same time taking care of practical affairs? We may feel like that soldier, caught between two undesirable options. Finding both-and solutions is rarely easy. It requires great creativity and a willingness to be vulnerable. It often requires a willingness to be humble and to laugh at ourselves. But as Christians, we have the both-and Christ Jesus, human and divine, sacrifice and savior, who lights the way with a double flame. Two lights. One savior. Humble and exalted. Poor and rich. Human and Divine. We want to walk as children of the light. We may feel like that stuck soldier, but shine in our hearts, Lord Jesus, and show us how to juggle.