

The Bible tells me so...

Luke 14: 25-27 and 33, John 3: 13-17

*Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.*

Good afternoon (still odd to say!) and welcome/welcome back to this sacred chapel time - the time we take each weekday during the school year to come together to worship, to celebrate, to bless, to grieve, to be God's people in this place. How I miss this time when students are away in the summer and how joyful it is to return to this daily, holy rhythm of our lives together at Augsburg. Welcome home.

One of my favorite memories in my 19+ years at Augsburg is when beloved music faculty member, the late Gabe Gabrielson, would sit at the piano and share with us his ten variations on "Jesus loves me." It was at once intimate and whimsical and inspiring and comforting, even jazzy a bit, and it always brought a holy silence to the room.

For some of us, we will resonate deeply with the simple faith message of "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and that is all we need to hear in order to be firm in our faith journey. I recall coming to college 50 years ago with that understanding of my simple faith. Growing up in the church with my Dad as my pastor, I had no reason to question, no reason to doubt, no reason to believe there was another way.

It was not long into my college days, though, in some sort of introductory Bible class, that religion faculty members (some might say, gleefully) raised serious questions about my Biblical claims. You know there are four gospel accounts, and the stories vary from book to book, what do you make of a sermon on the plain vs. the sermon on the mount, and what about that crazy John, what's with the Word being there in the beginning and then becoming flesh - really? And so on and so on - enough to make you wonder, perhaps even to doubt what you'd been taught, to begin to grow in your faith, perhaps, but maybe to back away from all these conflicting stories and claims.

In our Lutheran Christian tradition, we follow what is called the lectionary in setting the scripture readings for each day and Sunday. This morning, we read excerpts from both last Sunday's gospel from Luke and from this coming Sunday's gospel from John. On one hand, it is "give up all your possessions and take up the cross to follow me, Jesus proclaims", and on the other, it is "For God so loved the world, God sent God's only Son..." Pastor Babette suggested I might do a "mash-up" of these seemingly disparate passages. Instead, I want to

hold them in creative tension as they illustrate the ways in which the Bible shows us different ways of understanding the call to faith in the world.

Now, when we look at these two particular passages, they really are not so much in conflict with the message they convey as they reflect the completely different worldviews of their authors. For Luke, this is Jesus on the ground teaching his followers how to live. Some of the language is harsh - it calls for hating your family and giving up all your possessions - tough love, we might say. On the other hand, the writer of John, influenced by Greek philosophy, is much more focused on what is up above and what it takes to ascend to eternal life. So, what is it? Do we worry about earthly or heavenly things?

The remarkable Lutheran preacher and theologian, Joseph Sittler, once wrote of these differing stories and images of what it means to live as faithful disciples of Jesus: "The only access we have to Jesus is through the reported word about him, and that word is not consistent. A single parable may be given this way in Mark and quite another way in Luke or Matthew. That means...we have to build up the composite of differences, and then try to ask what the (early) church...meant when it said "Jesus is Lord."

And this composite of differences can be quite mind-bending. The spiritual guide and writer, Debie Thomas, suggests that the way to understand these differences is to see Christianity as a "religion of paradoxes. (O)f dissonant and seemingly contradictory truths that reveal the roominess of God." I love that phrase, the roominess of God for which paradox is the key. Thomas has her working list of these dissonant scriptural and theological claims. Here are a few: Jesus is God and Jesus is human; Creation is good and creation is broken; I'm a sinner and I'm a saint; Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is servant. We could go on with our own lists of the dissonance we often find in reading the Bible and reflecting on our faith.

Thomas then offers this reassuring word as we experience these conflicting claims: "Again and again, the way of Jesus invites us to hold opposing truths together, in pairings that seem impossible. This is not to confound us but to show how wide and spacious the realm of God really is."

This is hard and difficult stuff for those of us who live in this either-or, binary world. Living with paradox is not easy and requires patience and courage and resilience in the face of the demands of living our faith in the world.

Dr. Kit Kleinhans, who taught at Wartburg College and served as dean of Trinity Theological Seminary before her retirement, reminds us that our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther spoke of the faithful as simultaneously "saint and sinner," the Latin "simul justus et peccator." Now that's a paradox for you. As Kleinhans describes this paradox: "When I look at myself in the mirror, I always see the reflection of a sinner. But when God looks at me, he sees

me through Jesus. My sin is covered with Christ's own righteousness." Think about that: God sees us through Jesus! For God so loved the world, God sent God's only Son...

And therein lies the remarkable grace-filled message that inspires my living with the paradoxes of the scriptures, that helps me navigate through the dissonances that inevitably emerge in reading the Bible - even as I hope you will be among those students of the faith who are called to struggle with those dissonances. But in the midst of all these paradoxes, here is the Biblical message that guides our faithful lives in the world - it's really quite simple: Jesus loves me, Jesus loves you, for the Bible tells us so! Thanks be to God. Amen.