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The Challenges of Paradox

I am a native son of Massachusetts, raised up and ordained in that diocese to the diaconal ministry by Bishop John Melville Burgess. Staying connected to my New England roots is important to me. To that end I am nurtured most every Saturday morning by the whimsy of NPR's "Click and Clack," the Tappet Brothers, the diagnosticians of internal combustion.

One Saturday they shared this story: A husband and wife were in conversation about the wife's impending birthday. Now the wife had always wanted a Corvette and took the opportunity to express her desire in a somewhat circuitous way. She said; "now it's my 50th birthday and I would like to ask you for a special present. On my birthday I would really love something that is bright yellow and goes from 0-200 in less than 5 seconds." Her husband nodded and the conversation ended. Several weeks later on her birthday she received a number of smaller gifts and then her husband presented her with a somewhat strangely shaped box that was handsomely wrapped and topped with a bright yellow bow. Thinking that it was a model of her most desired birthday gift, she carefully opened the box and to her shock, pulled out a bright yellow bathroom scale. Need I say more about her surprise and disappointment?

This is a story about paradox. Paradox from the Latin "paradoxum," is defined as a statement or event that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and perhaps is true. A biblical paradox is found in the teaching of Jesus who said; "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

When the subject of the resurrection is brought up for discussion, especially as we experience it through its reading in the Gospel of John, we are confronted by paradox. At a time in biblical history when women were treated as property and of no account, it is Mary Magdalene, a woman and not a male disciple who is the first to understand that Jesus had overcome death on the cross. And it is Mary who runs breathlessly to tell the miraculous story of Christ's victory over death to the frightened, confused and bewildered disciples. Strange isn't it that God paradoxically should choose a woman of no standing in the community of Judaism to tell of this great event?

And in reading from the book of Acts today, paradox once again confronts us with the story of Philip the evangelist and the eunuch. The eunuch appears to be a man living in a no man's land, unable to be admitted to a worshipping Jewish congregation because of

his status in society, and yet is by account reading aloud from Hebrew Scripture, attempting to understand the words of the prophet Isaiah. And then along comes Philip, selected as one of the original 7 deacons of the emerging Christian Church who reaches out to this man, unacceptable in Jewish circles and interprets Isaiah from the Jesus perspective. And from what seems an impossibility, the eunuch is baptized and comes to know the living Christ. The paradox here is that which was rejected by the dominant faith tradition of the day is accepted by the newly formed, emerging one.

Interesting isn't it how God reveals himself to us and to the world! And God once again uses the gift of paradox to reveal that those things which have been cast down and disregarded by the world are the very vehicles that will forever be used to reveal the living presence of Christ in all of our lives.

A secular paradox has to do with a 13 year old that my wife Karen and I met while I was attending seminary in New Haven. Andre was severely handicapped as a Downs Syndrome child who was institutionalized and somewhat forgotten by society because of his extreme handicap. Andre possessed no real value to society, or so it seemed. Yet one day he was seen scribbling on a piece of paper using an amazing array of colors and shapes. Hard to define as nothing more than colorful blotches, it became apparent that they were very primitive drawings of soaring birds, bees, butterflies, trees, suns and even buildings. With support from a caring staff, his art work became more defined. Soon his art was transposed using acrylic paint on posters and religious vestments. The themes of his work were always about the beauty of life. Soon his work was adorning altar frontals, Eucharistic vestments, posters, clergy stoles and banners. Eventually he became a celebrity, with his work shown in local art galleries and churches. He eventually had shows outside of New Haven and even in Europe.

One night Karen and I were attending one of his shows at a local New Haven church. Amidst art critics, celebrities and collectors, Andre shyly sat in a corner by himself, in his own world, untouched by all the fuss. He had a hard time feeding himself and couldn't talk, but God took that which was of no account, that which had been despised, rejected and of no seeming value and forced the world to confront God's living presence in a most unimaginable way. Andre's physical life was short lived, but Andre and his gifts live on. I have been blessed to have one of his Eucharistic vestments, a chasuble. On one side Andre painted his vision of the world, replete with the tree of life in the center, surrounded by beautiful and creatively colored birds, bees, and a bright shining sun. On the other side, a magnificent rendition of the cross covered with butterflies. This was the joy and theology of Andre's world and it was a gift to all of God's creation.

Sadly we have not yet mastered the message of God's life changing, transforming power. For we continue to discard the Mary Magdalene's and Andre's of the world as having no place, no meaning, and no relevance. Our sensitivities are dulled by our own self importance, sophistication, status, self righteousness, our own material wealth, our love of things and our judging hearts as to who has value as a human being and who does not.

We really do need to reconnect with the great sensitivity of Jesus and his love for every human being. We need to re-evaluate our own condition in the world and give thanks for the many blessings that we have. We need to address the paradox of the world around us and claim it and then break down those barriers that divide us and separate us from one another.

Karen and I just returned from Africa last Thursday after spending 13 days visiting our diocesan partnership projects in Mozambique, Swaziland and South Africa. This partnership is a unique one involving the countries that reside within the Anglican Church of South Africa, USAID, the World Health Organization and the work of the Malaria research Center in Maciene, Mozambique. The paradox of American wealth and resources compared to the poverty, limited health care, life and premature death issues, especially in the Global South are appalling. And they stand as a stark reminder of the sinfulness of some within the Anglican Communion and a small destructive force within the Episcopal Church who are far more committed to fighting over issues of power and control within the Communion than they are in engaging in the cooperative ministry and compassionate mission that is so desperately needed now in better than two thirds of the global population.

The divisive conditions that currently prevail in the Anglican Communion over issues of human sexuality, scriptural interpretation and who will lead the Communion in the beginning of the 21st Century, and the labels used by some to demean the very humanity of those who disagree with them and oppose their theology and interpretation of Holy Scripture is not only wounding the Body of Christ but is an abomination that disfigures the very core message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Anglican Communion and a few within the Episcopal Church seem more intent in battling over who's in charge and who's going to "run the show" by re-defining the broad spectrum of theological and biblical orthodoxy than they are about addressing and releasing the human and financial church resources so desperately needed to address and positively impact spiraling global poverty, egregious human rights violations, disease, and violence against women and children; conditions that directly impact the very future of the global community. Such squabbling also impacts the ability of the Church to address local, regional and national issues exacerbated by the widening gulf between the wealthy and those living at and below the poverty level in our own country. For those who attended the Episcopal Church's General Convention in Columbus last June, the tragedy of that gathering was that so much time was spent trying to find an appropriate way to respond to the Windsor Report and come to some common understanding and agreement on human sexuality and gender issues, that a significant number of Resolutions dealing with global and national issues impacting the very life and health of the human family were never voted on by concurrence in both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, because we spent most of our time looking inward, instead of outward.

Across the Globe, more than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night. Every thirty seconds, an African child dies of malaria. Every year more than 10 million children die before their fifth birthday from completely preventable disease like pneumonia, tuberculosis, and water born intestinal diseases. Every day 20,000 people die because

they are too poor to live. And in our own country, over 13million children are living in poverty. The poverty level for a family of 4 in the United States is \$20,000. For a family of 3 it is \$16,000. And for a family of 2 it is \$13,200.00. Think of these numbers the next time you are complaining about the cost of tuition, the cost of gasoline, your own family budget, your church budget and your own personal income.

The number of children living in poverty in the U.S. has increased since 2000 by over 12%. Globally over 43 million souls live with AIDS. Every minute, 9 more persons are newly infected with AIDS and most of these new infections are occurring among vulnerable women and children. War, and asymmetrical violence and terrorism consume the lives of countless thousands each year. And too often, religion reveals itself to be the fault line that empowers such violence and death. It is now time for leadership at the highest levels within the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church to say, ENOUGH and get on with doing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The late William Sloan Coffin in his book Letters to a Young Doubter wrote about the founder of Riverside Church in New York City who once said; “the world has tried in two ways to get rid of Jesus: first by crucifying him, and second by worshipping him. Jesus doesn’t ask us to worship him. He said; “follow me.”

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more fortunate than 1 million souls on the face of the earth who will not survive the week.

If you have never been a participant in war, or been imprisoned or suffered torture at the hands of your captors, or suffered the pangs of hunger, you are ahead of 800 million souls on the face of the earth.

If you attend church or a religious meeting without being harassed, arrested, tortured or put to death, you are ahead of 3 billion people in the world.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of the world’s population.

If you can read a prayer book, a hymnal or a church service leaflet, you have been blessed: someone cared enough to support you on your educational journey, and you are ahead of 2 billion people in the world who can neither read or write.

The story of Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection is a timeless story filled with paradox. We need to be on the lookout for such paradox every day of our lives. For Jesus constantly reminds us that there is nothing stronger than love, not even death and that love will come to us from the strangest messengers. Bill coffin once said; “Faith puts people on the road, hope keeps them there and indeed love makes the world go around. Despair is not an option.”

Mary Magdalene, Andre, Philip the Evangelist and so many others known and unknown to us confront us daily with the gift of Jesus unconditional love, his total acceptance of who and what we are and the promise that every human being has merit and will have a place at the table if only we will make room for them. AMEN
