

“Wrestling with the Tradition”
August 20, 2006

Psalm 34:9-14
John 6:51-58

It’s probably a safe bet that most of us here this morning, or maybe even all of us, have relatives or friends whose company we enjoy – people that, in general, we like and respect – but who, to borrow a phrase from Art Linkletter, just say the darndest things. These are folks who *seem* sane – or at least as sane as we like to think that *we* are – and who seem like decent, compassionate people. But every now and then or even on a regular basis, they’ll say something that leaves us shaking our heads and shrugging our shoulders.

These moments can be lighthearted and amusing, like the time one of my relatives told me that we had to put the matches in a safe place, not because the *children* might play with them – because there were no children – but because the *squirrels* might play with them and burn the house down. Oh ... ok. Well, that’s a different way of looking at things!

This kind of encounter can also have little more substance to it and yet still be lighthearted, like a conversation I had 25 years ago with some of my relatives in West Texas. That summer, I was moving across the country to Berkeley, to attend law school, and my cousin said, “Oh, good. Then you can get those radicals to straighten up!” I paused and then told her the truth. “Well, no, I’m actually going to Berkeley so I can *join* the radicals!”

But there are also times when we hear a friend or relative – *or ourselves* – say something that takes us into deeper, more troubling waters. All the sudden, in a conversation, someone says the words that reveal a coldness of heart, a refusal to see the humanity and beauty of another person or another group of people, or an enthusiastic desire to see someone else suffer, to pay for real or imagined misdeeds. Sometimes what we hear erases the smiles from our faces and drains the hope from our hearts.

I’m fairly confident that many of us have had all of these kinds of experiences with friends, family – and ourselves. I’m also fairly confident that many of us have also had these kinds of experiences with the writings in this book. In prayer, in study, in conversation with our ancestors in faith, whose stories and ideas fill this book, we have those moments when we’re amused or perplexed – or *horrified* – by what we read and what we hear.

I, for one, always get a good chuckle out of the story of Jonah, who so wanted God to destroy every last person in the city of Ninevah but who was enraged at God because a worm destroyed the shade tree he had been using. Jonah, in essence, says, “Destroy all those people but save my tree.” I just shake my head and want to tell him, “Jonah, honey, get a grip!”

And then there are dozens of detailed instructions for animal sacrifices in the ancient Hebrew scriptures and the wildly imaginative descriptions of heaven and earth and Jesus and the age to come in the New Testament’s Book of Revelation. These writings present ways of understanding the cosmos and humanity’s place in it that are

very different from the ones that are familiar to me. They are intriguing, perhaps engaging, but they often remain foreign and even irrelevant to many of us.

But most difficult of all, at least for me, are the passages that exalt the supposed victory of one group of people over another, whether it's the Israelites over the Canaanites or the Christians over the Jews, and then claim God's blessing for the destruction and for the assertions of superiority of one people over another. I struggle to hear the word of God in these passages, but I do not; I cannot. And I know that some of you can't, either.

What, then, my beloved brothers and sisters, are we to do with this book? In my time here in Sonoma, I've already heard a number of you, either explicitly or implicitly, suggest that we should simply leave it in the dirt and try to free ourselves from its ambiguities and what seem to be its distorted views of the human-divine relationship.

I guess that could be an option, but, right away, I see at least three problems with the idea. The first is simply that I'd be at a bit of a loss – more than a bit – trying to preach every week without the challenge and guidance of the Biblical texts. The second is that we would still be dealing with plenty of ambiguity and distortion, because the ambiguity and distortion we carry in our own lives and hearts aren't all that different from what we find in the Bible. And the third problem is that, for those of us who are members, we joined the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, a church that states very *unambiguously* that it “accepts the Bible as a guide in the practice of faith and living.” So unless we joined this church hoping to remove or destroy one of its cornerstones – the Bible – we need to *continue* to face the question, “What are we to do with this book?”

Now, if any of you are wondering why in the world I'm up here talking about this, let's go back to this morning's reading from the Gospel of John.

‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

The Jews [as if Jesus and his followers were *not* Jews, which they were] then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have *no* life in you [*no life* at all].’

Here, in one short Gospel passage, we encounter the beginnings of several aspects of the Christian tradition that many of us find strange, at best, and destructive, at worst. We encounter elements of the tradition with which we need to wrestle and which, perhaps, we need to leave behind.

Perhaps most striking about this reading is its rather gruesome metaphors of eating flesh and drinking blood. (It's no wonder that citizens and officials of the early Roman Empire accused Christians of being cannibals!) But even if we can understand and accept these metaphors as the first Christians' efforts to describe how fully they felt fed and nourished by God through Jesus, we still encounter in this passage the beginnings of Christian anti-Judaism and the triumphalist claims that Christianity is the one and only path to God. These themes are present in this morning's reading, and they are present *throughout* the Gospel of John.

Now, historians and Biblical scholars offer several explanations for the strong anti-Jewish themes in the Gospel of John and for its insistence on the way of Jesus being the only true path toward God. I think some of their theories are convincing and some aren't. But explanations – good, bad, or indifferent – leave this text untouched and intact, and *we* are left, once again, with the question, “What are we to do with this book? What are we to do with its destructive words?”

As odd as it may seem, I, for one, turn back to this book to find an answer. And I find it in the words ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah. Long ago, Jeremiah said that the Word of the Lord had come to him and promised, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:33) Through Jeremiah, we hear God's promise to place holy truth within us, to inscribe on our hearts God's vision for all of creation, a vision in which we follow the sacred paths of justice, mercy, compassion, and peace.

I do trust God's promise that there is truth in our hearts, but I also know that that truth can be warped, silenced, or obscured by the harm done to us and by the harm we inflict on others. I do believe that truth – incomplete, partially hidden, distorted though it may be – resides in your hearts, in my heart, *and* in the hearts of the people who produced the Gospel of John.

When we encounter something in the Gospel of John, in other parts of the Bible, or in the Christian tradition that grieves us, that seems to lack the truth, that suggests that anyone is outside God's grace and mercy, let us remember God's promise to write – and continue to write – holy truth and a holy vision on *all* our hearts. In prayer, in conversation, in wrestling not only with one another here, in this time and place, but also with the folks who bequeathed us this book, let us seek to discover the glimpses of God's vision that *we* have been given. And let us consider the glimpses our *ancestors* are offering us. We will find that those ancestors are no more or less human than we are. Their knowledge of God, their understanding of the holy, is no more or less perfect than ours is ... no more or less worthy of unquestioned acceptance ... and no more or less worthy of disdain or scorn.

We have much to give one another. We have much to teach one another. And that “we” includes all of us here *and* all of those whose lives and faith made this church, this congregation, possible. Just as Jacob in the Book of Genesis was willing to wrestle all night long with God and demand a blessing, let us be willing to wrestle with this book and with the Christian tradition, demanding a blessing of wisdom and truth for ourselves and for the world.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
August 20, 2006