

Pastor T.C Arnold
3rd Sunday in Lent
Luke 11:14-28
March 11th, 2012

A former professor of mine, Rev. F. Rossow, said once that there is a surprising amount of paradox in the Bible, both within texts and between texts. A paradox might make it seem as if there is a contradiction. But actually, when studied carefully, shows a profound truth and is not a contradiction at all. Perhaps the best-known example of paradox within a text is Jesus' statement "*He that finds his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it*" (Matthew 10:39). Which is it – lose it or find it? Then there is this one, "*For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away*" (Luke 8:18). What? Jesus will take away from the one who has nothing and give it to the one who already has everything? It doesn't seem possible it is true.

These are paradoxes within a text. Perhaps even more intriguing are the ones that exist between texts. For example in John 7:34 Jesus says, "...*where I am, you cannot come.*" What? Really? And then a little later in John 12:26 we hear Jesus say, "...*where I am, there will my servant be also.*" And then there is our text for today. Jesus says, "*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*" But then in Mark 9:40 Jesus says, "*For the one who is not against me is for us.*" Jesus talks about the ones who are not against Him in one and then those who are not with Him in the other.

When the Bible is read in a vacuum, that is, without the proper context of what Jesus was saying, it could seem to contradict itself. But when understood and studied carefully these passages yield a profound truth. You see, that's our goal – truth!! Our goal isn't tension or contradiction. Our goal isn't to be ambiguous, vague or confusing (though you might be confused right now). The goal is truth... and your pastors want you to see the truth... to know the truth.

And here is the truth: the verses that seem to contradict each other actually don't. And, as a matter of fact, they help us to behold a beautiful truth. Here is the beautiful truth. Because of our sins we are unable to be with Jesus in heaven. Yet because of Jesus we will spend eternity in heaven. Ha! Another paradox! It seems as though our Christian life is full of them. We are condemned, yet we are redeemed. We are dead yet we live. We are sinners yet we are saints.

Charles Dickens was right in his epic novel A TALE OF TWO CITIES. "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.*" Yes, two different things can be in one city. Two different things can describe and identify one person – our condition, our feelings, our lives.

Are you a "two in one?" Are you a living paradox? I guarantee you are. Here are the blessed people of God sitting before me today. No one seems to be crying...at least right now. Mostly you have expressions of concentration on your faces... or maybe its confusion or sheer boredom. You will most likely come out of church this morning and shake my hand like you always do. You will most likely smile and tell me that you are doing fine if I ask you, "How are you doing today?" And you might be doing fine...and that is fantastic. However, you might not be. You might be both – two in one – fine and "not so" fine. This is not a contradiction – it happens to be what you are.

At the beginning of the Gospel text for today Jesus gives us an example of a true contradiction. Jesus says that a divided house falls – it cannot stand. That is the reason Jesus could not possibly be Beelzebul, the prince of demons. If Jesus is casting out demons, it would stand to reason that He is not a demon himself. If He was, He would be hurting His own cause.

No, someone from God, in this case God Himself, is going to have to do that job. Beelzebul is not with Jesus. Therefore, he is against Him. And that is why Jesus says so in the text for today.

Today, our Christian homes need this same Jesus to stand against the devil, the world and sin. A house united in Christ is the best offense for and defense against that which sets out to divide us. There is a paradox in our homes and in our communities. We live in the world but we are not of the world. When we deal with family and friends...with neighbors and strangers...at work or at school... remember who we are and whose we are. In this fallen world it is sometimes hard to do the right thing. But that is what God would expect from us for the sake of those around us with whom we live and serve.

In a divided sin-filled world, we are united in Christ. That may come as no surprise since I'm talking to Christians. However, I do realize that sometimes it's hard to see and understand – with all the “not so” fine things that happen to us in life. Jesus is not trying to cast Himself out of your life. Jesus is not ignoring you, abandoning you, leaving you to die in your sins while being consumed by all that desires to wreck you. I know that's the way it can seem to be from time to time.

Jesus is not against Himself. He is not out there in your life ruining His own work. That would be a true contradiction. No, instead we understand what Jesus says in these verses from the perspective of the law and from the perspective of the Gospel. They are words of law and words of Gospel. When you hear words like, “you are condemned. You are dead. There is no life in you.” Those are true words. Our Lord is calling us what we are in ourselves – alone – apart from Christ. When you hear works like, “you are saved, you are alive, death shall not rule over you.” Those are true words. Our Lord is calling us what we are in Christ – who is with us and we are not alone. Beloved, know and see the difference. It is a paradox but it is not a contradiction. It's not either/or, it's both/and.

Here's one more both/and for you. We live in the *now* and the *not yet*. The *now* has its ups and downs – it has its stumbles and falls – it has its “pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and do better next times” as well. The *not yet* for us happened 2000 years ago at an event that we are getting closer and closer to in our yearly celebrations. The *not yet* is heaven and yes our “*not yet*” was made perfect for us in the past. The *now* is a life lived under the law. But because we also live in the *not yet*, we live today in the Gospel as well. This Gospel happened and yet it is happening and it will still happen again. Beloved, welcome to the Christian life. And if all this “paradox talk” has been confusing to you... I say again... beloved, welcome to the Christian life. Who among us has got it all figured out?

Our Lord is with us, not against us. Our Lord gathers and does not scatter. This is where we happen to be with our Lord. This is the Christian – with Christ and gathering. Christ gathered you – and He did it in a strange way – a way that seems to contradict itself. He gave you life by dying. How can that be? Well, you know the truth. Our sins were taken by Him. His life was given from Himself to you. That's how it works. You don't deserve it, and neither do I. And that, beloved in the Lord, may be the biggest paradox of all. How could God continue to love such poor miserable sinners? That kind of love is a mystery. But even though it may be mysterious, we know it to be true. Thank God for that. Thank God He loves us that much! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen