

## The Church of Both/And

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The Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Matthew 4:12-25

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ” -- Matthew 4:23

I hope I haven't misled any of you this morning with the title of my sermon. “The Church of Both/And” is not meant to imply, as some folks seem to think, that the UCC in general or Faith UCC in particular is “The Church of Anything Goes” or “The Church of Having It All.”

Some folks seem to think that being a liberal church, as we are, means that we get to eat our cake and have it, too. We get to call ourselves Christian without making any of the changes in our lives that would make us followers of Jesus. We don't give up anything, we don't take on anything, we don't change anything. In short, we look pretty much like most other Midwestern, middle-class suburbanites around the start of the twenty-first century. For some folks, that's what it would mean to be The Church of Both/And, and it sounds pretty attractive – sign me up.

Those of you who have listened patiently to my preaching over the years know that I wouldn't preach that kind of message or promote that kind of church. A church whose members aren't qualitatively different from the world around them seems to me more like The Church of Why Bother? In more classical terms, coined by the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that's The Church of Cheap Grace.

If you want to do nice things for the world, there's no end of social service agencies who'd welcome your time, talents, and treasure. If you want to learn all about the minutiae of biblical criticism or metaphysical speculation, there are plenty of institutions of higher education where you can run down one intellectual rabbit hole after another.

But if, on the other hand, you want to be part of a vast company of people, whom no one can number, who take both the spiritual and the material realities of life with equal seriousness, then welcome to The Church of Both/And, which takes as one of its central texts, as I do this morning, the twenty-third verse of the fourth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, which says, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Teaching about the kingdom and curing the world of its suffering – that's the mission statement of The Church of Both/And. With one foot firmly planted in the spiritual reality of God's way of life – the kingdom Matthew calls it – and the other foot firmly planted in the realities of this world – where people suffer disease and sickness – The Church of Both/And holds in graceful and creative tension the two realities with which the rest of the world often fumbles.

It's easy, you see, to respond to the world's needs with no sense of God's realm –

no sense of a way of being in the world that continually challenges this one. The world has lots of nice people in it – decent, honorable, hard-working people – who want the world to stay pretty much as it is . . . only a little bit better.

Folks like this, who probably make up most of our liberal churches, are embarrassed by Jesus' talk of the realm of God or even Jesus talk at all. For folks like them, religion isn't about the end of the world as we know it; it's about making the world as we know it a better place.

But that's not what Jesus came preaching. Jesus urged us to join another world – the kingdom of heaven – whose standards, rules, and subjects are radically different from this world. In that realm, there's no more eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth justice. Justice there isn't punitive, it's restorative. It attempts to recover the loss, not further the loss by inflicting pain on the guilty.

In God's realm, you pray for those who hate you, and you do not return violence with violence, no matter how many people in your society say it's okay. That's a very different world from ours, where shoot-first-and-face-a-sympathetic-jury later is becoming our M.O. Donna Nedrow told me last week that, after Tuesday's shooting at Purdue University, her son David simply asked, "How many this time?" That's our new normal in bullet-riddled America – How many this time?

In God's realm, it's the least who matter most, not the folks with deep pockets on K Street who can legally bribe our politicians.

In God's realm, the rich and powerful – and the rich are always powerful – will have to squeeze to get in harder than a camel has to squeeze to get through the eye of a needle. That's a very different place, that realm, from our world's gated communities, exclusive ZIP codes, and sheltered offshore accounts.

It's a different world out there in God's realm, and we in The Church of Both/And forget that at our peril. Like Jesus and Israel's prophets before him, we need to remain keen to that sense of divine discontent with business as usual, so that we live less like stakeholders in this world and more like visitors.

And at the same time, we continue, as Jesus did, to heal the world's brokenness as it confronts us day in and day out. There is no retreat from the world for the members of The Church of Both/And. We teach and we heal – not just spiritually, but spiritually and physically. We don't wrap ourselves so tightly in the mantle of our faith that we shut off the oxygen to our brains. We minister to the world that is even as we work with God to make it the world that is to come. We face reality squarely, which means challenging systems that perpetuate or cloak injustice even as we feed the hungry on Euclid Avenue. The Christian church has a long track record of being the world's good Samaritan, but we could be a better Samaritan if we tried to improve the safety on the Jericho road.

I'd like to close this sermon with a very personal story. It's a story from my childhood, and its truth and significance have only gradually become clear to me as I've aged.

It may surprise some of you to learn that, like a good many here this morning, I was taught the Lord's Prayer by a Roman Catholic nun. It happened this way.

In 1965, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a radical mastectomy. After her discharge from the hospital, her wounds had to be cared for at home. Although there may have been home health services available for such a task in those days, we were too poor to afford them, and so, twice a week for several months, a Roman Catholic nun from one of the charitable orders came to our house to help my very Protestant mother care for her incisions. I don't remember the nun's name – I was five and hadn't started school yet – but I do remember the sound of her voice from the kitchen, where she and my mother chatted while I played on the living room floor.

When the nursing work was done and Sister had re-packed her medical bag, I would be called into the kitchen to join my mother as the nun led us in the Lord's Prayer. It was always the last thing she did before saying good-bye and starting the walk back to her convent. I know that many of you do not remember the nuns of your childhood as fondly as I remember the single nun of mine, but I'll always be grateful for the profound lesson Sister taught me in the Christian faith, a faith grounded in love that expressed itself in both teaching and healing. Like all true religious, Sister loved the world, body and soul, no exceptions.

We Christians in The Church of Both/And have always had a twofold mission, embodied in and given to us by Jesus: proclaim the good news of God's realm and care for the material needs of the least in the world's eyes, but who are Jesus's sisters and brothers and yes, even Jesus himself. That's Big Tent Christianity, and whether you're an egg-headed person like me who tends to think things to bits, or whether you're a person of action who gets jobs done without fuss or bother, there's a pew in The Church of Both/And, and it's got your name on it.