



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randell K. Bush on May 5, 2024

Text: Philippians 2:5-11

Faithful Paradoxes: Fully Human, Fully Divine

The author F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”¹ Two opposing ideas held in mind at the same time – that’s a good definition of a paradox. A paradox is something that is self-contradictory and seemingly absurd in the plain sense of its words. Comedians are fond of making paradoxical comments. Groucho Marx said, “I wouldn’t belong to any club that would have me as a member.” Yogi Berra said, “Nobody goes there anymore; it’s too crowded.” What is less commonly discussed is how dependent religious language is on paradox.

If you’re a regular churchgoer, you may not even notice how often paradoxes appear in scripture. But on any given Sunday, you will hear things like “The first shall be last,” “The meek shall inherit the earth,” “When I am weak, then I am strong,” and “Those who lose their life shall find it.” You may be used to such language, but to non-churchgoers, skeptics and agnostics, this paradoxical language causes them to shake their heads in disbelief.

Sure, there is value in plain speaking without resorting to poetry, metaphors, or complex turns of phrase. But it is also true that some things simply can’t be expressed through the dry language of facts, figures, and straight talk. Just as there’s a beauty to “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” there’s a deeper, richer beauty to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony or Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto. The simplest language doesn’t always communicate what’s most important. So if the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas at the same time and still function, the test of a first-rate faith is the ability to embrace two opposing, even paradoxical ideas at the same time and still believe. This idea comes up in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians where we encounter one of the biggest paradoxes of our faith – the belief that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine.

Now, to be clear, Paul’s language isn’t quite as concise as what I just said: fully human, fully divine. But it comes close when he talks about how Christ was in the form of God and didn’t regard equality with God as something to be exploited – and then goes on to say Christ emptied himself, taking on the form and likeness of humanity. This paradoxical language isn’t a “one-off” in scripture. Think about the beginning of the gospel of John with its stirring language about “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” – followed by the verse “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” In both cases, we have a fully divine Christ, the Word and Logos who is one with God, becoming flesh, fully human to dwell with us.

Ultimately this is great news! If Jesus were only divine, then that would mean a distance always exists between God and us – a gap between who we physically are and the heavenly One who loves and redeems us. And if Jesus were only human, then the fullness of God’s grace and love couldn’t really be available to us, certainly not 2000 years after Jesus’s time on earth. It is only through the coming together of these two realities that we are given lasting hope through faith in the God of all who intimately knows us all.

There’s another reason why this paradox of faith is such good news. Believing in Christ as fully human and fully divine means that when we want to understand who God is, we look to the example of Jesus who was the embodiment of God’s love, power and justice. And when we want to understand who we are supposed to be, we also look to Jesus as an example of what true humanity looks like when grounded in and guided by the perfect will of God.

All this paradoxical language didn’t just develop overnight. It had its roots in the writings of Paul and the gospel of John. But it was discussed and debated for over 400 years by great minds like Tertullian, Ambrose and St. Augustine. Finally at the all-church Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, a profession of faith was composed that described Jesus as fully human, fully divine, paradoxically saying he possessed two natures in one being. We believe that in Christ, God looks squarely at us, and in Jesus, we can look squarely upon God.

I’ve spent some time trying to explain this paradox as simply as I can, but I’m sure for many of you this idea still doesn’t make rational sense. We can imagine a divine Christ, the resurrected Lord, but it is hard to picture how this same person was an incarnate human being like one of us. There’s no room for two beings in one person. It’s like the old story of a man who sought out a Buddhist sage and said to him, “I want you to teach me everything about Buddhism.” The wise teacher suggested they first have a cup of tea. As they sat together and the tea was finally ready, the teacher filled his guest’s cup to the brim and then kept pouring so that the tea spilled over the sides. The man shouted “Stop” because tea was going everywhere. To which the teacher replied, “How can I teach you about Buddhism when your head is already full to overflowing with your own ideas?”

If Jesus is fully divine, how can there be room for him to human like us and vice versa? Long ago the apostle Paul gave us an answer. He wrote, “Christ, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself, taking on mortality, human form, humbling himself to the point of death – even death on the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him, filled him back up so we confess him as Lord to the glory of God.”

Paul doesn't give us a dry scientific description; he gives us scriptural poetry. He doesn't provide a diagram of Jesus' two natures. Instead he describes a choreography that captures this divine-human dance: Jesus with God, emptying himself to be with us and then moving past a cross and a resurrection to be elevated, exalted, and full of God's glory once again. Remember: Faith is a living thing and in its dance, two different things can co-exist; opposites can be held in tension; paradoxes can be wonderfully true.

It is this quality of paradoxical faith that I tried to capture through playing the short piece by Bach and Siloti. The piece is a prelude largely built upon the repetition of flowing 16th-notes. It can be played in a straightforward way and is lovely in its own right. But the piece is more than just those right-hand notes. Tucked inside it is another melody built around sustained half notes that only need to be emphasized in order to change the piece into something else altogether, something deeper and richer than before. Both versions are unique yet they co-exist, patiently waiting for us to slow ourselves down and listen to this musical paradox with ears of faith.

So why on this Sunday morning in May have I spent so much time talking about paradoxes, church history and the Council of Chalcedon, about Christ's divinity and humanity? Why is this important? People regularly ask me about the future of the church as they see congregations dwindle and sanctuaries close for good. Part of my answer is that I firmly believe the last thing the world needs are simplistic and superficial answers from our houses of faith. You do not build up churches by dumbing down the message we have to share. Christianity built around the lowest-common denominator may work on greeting cards and bumper stickers, but it does little when life is hard, when a cancer diagnosis is announced, when a relationship is struggling.

At the heart of faith is the affirmation that God is God and we are not; that the miracles of this world are not something we can ever fully grasp but things we can always wonder about and rejoice in. We are so smart and yet in many ways we know so little – which is why we have poetry and art and literature and love and forgiveness and paradoxes like a Savior who is fully human and fully divine. These deep truths are worth a lifetime of study since we only pass this way but once, and try as we might, we only see in a mirror dimly.

Think about our nation today and it is also clear why this is so important. All around us voices tell us to accept one side of the paradox or the other. You're either blue or red, pro-choice or pro-life, for Gaza or for Israel. But breaking down the walls that divide us will not happen by rationality alone – by trying to be as clear and simple as possible in our reasoning so that the other side will suddenly see the light and everyone will get along just fine. There is complexity in every major issue that confronts us, whether about the nature of a healthy democracy, or how to balance free speech and public safety on our campuses, or how to preserve a planet's resources even as we need those same resources to survive. Because of this complexity, we cannot be afraid of deep

conversations, of imperfect answers, and of having to hold two opposing ideas in our minds and still function in an ever-changing world.

Given this reality, a paradoxical faith has much to offer. It moves us beyond superficial answers toward deeper truths. It calls us away from “looking out for number 1” to “how can I serve the common good.” And when things are hardest and we feel the most unsure about the future, we sense a hand under our chin, lifting our gaze and inviting us to look once more upon this Jesus of Nazareth, this Christ of the Easter resurrection, the one who didn’t count equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking on our form for us – for all of us – for good. As I said earlier, now we see in a mirror dimly, but in time, paradoxically, we shall see face to face; now we know only in part, but then we shall know even as we are fully known. For all of this, thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up,” *Essence*, February 1936