

Sermon: Our Contradictions in Life

Some of the funniest and most terrifying aspects of my life are my self-contradictions – the contradictions with which I live, the contradictions that live within me. Those closest to me would probably say they are more aggravating and frustrating than funny.

Most days my life is a living contradiction between what I say and what I do, what I think and what I say, the values I claim to hold in my life and the way I live my life.

Let me give you some examples.

- I'm always wanting to start a diet. I want to eat better and lose a little weight but, I don't want to be hungry, and I want to eat what I want.
- Sometimes I pray with deep faith and commitment, and other times I don't know why or to whom I'm even praying for.
- Sometimes I preach the truth of the gospel with courage and conviction holding nothing back. Other times I back a little bit off the truth because I don't want to upset anyone.
- There are days when I believe Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life, and other days when I'm not so sure, when it seems my faith is really being tested.

Do you remember the rich young man who asks Jesus, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus tells him to sell everything and give the money to the poor. But he was unwilling or unable to do that and left grieving.

Sometimes I want my life to change and be different, but I don't want to do the work, be uncomfortable, or have to change. I'm not sure how I think that is going to work.

My guess is that you know these kinds of contradictions, and they may be in your life too. I don't think they're unique to me.

Have you ever told a lie and then felt terrible because you know that's not who you are or how you want to live? You knew you had contradicted your own values.

How many of us have said one thing and then done the very opposite? We teach our kids the golden rule and then speak about or treat another in ways we would never want for ourselves.

How many times have you said, "On the one hand ... but on the other hand ..." and you just didn't know which you wanted or was right? You were divided, of two minds.

Have you ever continued living your life knowing it was not the life you wanted, that it lacked meaning, that there was more?

What other contradictions do we live with? What other contradictions live within us? In what ways are our lives today a living contradiction?

If you recognize contradictions in your life, then today's scriptures are for you and me.

They present us with several images of living contradictions.

Do you remember the contradiction in our reading from the Old Testament. It's the snake. Does the snake take life, or does it give life? The answer is yes to both.

The venom and the anti-venom, the poison and the medicine, are both present. The snake that bites and kills is also the snake that heals and gives life. We all know that snake in our lives.

Think about a time or circumstance in your life about which you've said, "I wouldn't trade that experience for the world, and I never want to go through that again."

They are times and experiences that our life falls apart and is put back together again in ways we never could or would have imagined. It's hitting bottom only to discover the bottom is a springboard back up.

It's those times when we say, "It's killing me to do this," and yet we somehow trust that killing is not the end but the start of new life and the possibility of more life.

And in today's gospel Jesus sets out contradictions between those who believe and those who do not, those who come to the light and those who love darkness, those who do what is true and those who do evil.

I want us to be careful here. I don't think Jesus is setting out those contradictions with the idea that we are to categorize ourselves and others.

Which ones are you? Which ones am I? Aren't we really both at the same time? That's my experience. What about you?

I used to think those kinds of contradictions were a simple choice, an either/or situation, this or that. I no longer think that. I think it's about more than simply making the right moral choice.

The truth is sometimes I believe and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I seek the light and other times I want the darkness. Sometimes I exhibit the truth and other times I don't.

And I wonder sometimes if that isn't true for all of us.

Most of the time I want to deny, ignore, or turn away from the contradictions in my life. They are not easy to look at. They remind me what really matters and is most important to me, and the ways I've forgotten that. They let me know I've gotten off track. They're often painful. They hold things before me I don't want to see. They ask changes of me I don't want to make. They reveal my wounds, fears, and limitations. They remind me that sometimes I settle for easy and superficial solutions.

But what if contradictions are the tension in which we all live? And what if that tension isn't what pulls us apart but what holds us together? What if every contradiction is a sacrament with outward and visible signs or actions pointing to inward and spiritual graces? What if every contradiction is a messenger telling us about a deeper truth?

What if we were to lift up the contradictions in our lives and take a look at them? "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up".

This lifting up is about more than a snake on a pole or Jesus on the cross.

This is the lifting up our contradictions.

Whatever forms our contradictions might take they are ultimately about the contradiction between life and death. Each contains the other. The serpent that poisons also heals. The cross that kills is also the tree of life. Every life will end in death and every death holds a new life. That's the contradiction lifted up before us today.

And I wonder what that looks like in your life today? I've told you some of my self-contradictions, what are yours? What if we used Lent as a time to lift up our contradictions – to listen, pay attention, and look deeper?

What might the contradictions in your life be asking of you today? What new ways of seeing and living are they offering to us all? Amen