

Sermon: Faithful Tension
Scripture: Mark 2: 15-17
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: March 20, 2011

I imagine this morning that each of us sitting in this sacred space is holding a certain degree of tension within our lives as we come together to worship. I know, it's like I'm a mind reader or something, right?! Maybe it's one big specific situation of great tension or maybe there are a lot of little tensions or maybe there are lots of little tensions packed around one big specific tension, I don't know exactly, but what I do know is that we all are holding some level of tension in our lives as we enter into this worship space. What if I asked you right now to turn to the person beside you and ask him or her "what tension do you hold in your life right now?" Do you have any doubt but that they could give you an ear-full?

Partly I find it somewhat comforting to remember I am not alone in this. Partly I find it amazing to think that we are as civil to one another as we are, sitting here quietly and respectfully when there's all this stuff that we are each holding. Seems more probably that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered there would be regular brawls breaking out, so much tension do some of us carry. An old Scottish minister used to address this by ending his services with a simple statement every Sunday, saying "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a tough battle." Everyone you meet.

Again, this is why prayers of confession are an important part of how we as Christians have always done worship together. We begin by remembering together that while God is completely whole and good, we humans are stuck living in the tension of sensing that wholeness is possible, but not being whole ourselves, knowing what it means to be good but at times acting less than good, imagining the infinite but having to live with being finite.

Our sacred scriptures, both Old and New Testament, from front to back, is really one long account of human beings living in the tension of life. There are brief moments of tension resolved but each resolution seems only to lead into even greater levels of tension. The Hebrew people are released from the great tension of slavery only to find the tensions increase of living stuck together in the wilderness. They finally reach the

Promised Land only to find tensions multiplied with the indigenous people there. They become a nation which resolves nothing but increases their tensions among themselves and their neighbors and on and on. In the first pages of the New Testament, the tensions immediately pour out at the very outset of the incarnation of God, they surface everywhere Jesus goes in his public ministry— he eats with sinners and tax-collectors?? - and reach a head in the crucifixion, the ultimate symbol of tension, Jesus himself stretch out on the cross. And even in the great resolution of the resurrection, we only have to turn to the pages of Paul's letters and the accounts of the earliest Christians to see the tensions erupting in the very ranks of the earliest followers of Jesus! One thing that the Bible is apparently not is a self-help book for living a tension-free life...which is why it is not in the self-help section of bookstores. There are those books that claim to give us the spiritual secret of living tension-free lives: just put out there to the universe what you need and what you want and it'll come back to you; voila: easy, peaceful, tension free...but that's not our Bible, nor is it, I would suggest, our spiritual path as Christians

The Christian spiritual path is not an answer for the question: "how do I live in peace and release myself from the needless tensions of life" but rather "how do I live faithfully within the tension that IS life?" It's the same on the communal and world scale as it is on the intra-psychic individual scale: it's not how do we live in peace without conflict in community and in the world but how do we live faithfully within the tension and conflict that is a reality of our lives together on earth? The goal, for better or worse, is not a blissed-out state beyond all tensions but a blessed-in state... blessing the tensions as the harrowing call to a higher dialogue.

The writer and theologian Ron Rolheiser in his book Holy Longings refers to our "work" being to "ponder" life's tensions rather than move too soon to resolve them. He invites us to use Mary, the mother of Jesus, as our prime example, who stood before the various events of Jesus' life and even before the cross where she watched her son die and she "held all these things in her heart". Rolheiser says that this is "the type of mysticism that we most need today to revitalize our faith; precisely this kind of pondering, a willingness to carry tension as Mary did.... We are better persons", he says, "when we carry tension as opposed to always looking for its easy resolution." Rolheiser asks the reader to consider what exactly makes for a great heroine or hero in literature, for nobility

of soul? His answer: “we ascribe that quality to the person who mindless of his or her own comfort, need and pain is willing for a higher reason to carry a great tension for a long period of time, not acquiescing to the temptation to prematurely resolve things.” And this is what we need, he contends, in our day and age: more and more people who are willing to carry tension for the sake of God, love, truth and principle. And we need this because so much in our culture works in exactly the opposite direction.. Hear Rolheiser again:

Almost everything in our culture invites us to avoid tension and to resolve it whenever possible. This is true for virtually every aspect of our lives, except those areas where we can be fiercely ascetical and sweat blood for purposes of our career or the health and slimness of our bodies. Waiting in frustration and inconsummation is not our strong point. From minor frustrations, like waiting in a queue at the bank or the bus, to more major frustrations with interpersonal tensions and our unresolved sexual needs, we find it difficult to stay inside unresolved tension. Jacques Maritan, the great Catholic philosopher, once said that one of the great spiritual tragedies is that so many people of good will would become a noble soul, if only they would not panic and resolve the painful tension within their lives too prematurely, but rather stay with them long enough, as one does in the dark night of the soul, until those tensions are transformed and help give birth to what is most noble inside us – compassion, forgiveness and love.”

Of course one must be careful not to suggest someone experiencing an abusive situation needs to stay within that tension until some higher resolve arises, but in our everyday lives the tendency can too often be to move too quickly to resolution. What might be gained by a willingness to sit a little longer in the tension? What are those situations in our lives where we can wait before moving to resolution, where we can live within the tension, trust God a little more in the situation? I have to admit that it’s not always easy to know how long is long enough to sit in the tension and when the time has come to actively seek a resolution but for me at least I know if I am going to err it’ll be on the side of rushing too quickly towards resolution, ‘cause who likes to just sit in the tension, and that my work is to breathe right there and hold on longer, maybe much longer, than my mind, intuition or even my heart is telling me is wise.

I’d like us in the coming silence to consider those points of tension in our lives and to consider that there might be value in just sitting this week or this

month in the continued tension of it without pressing for or running towards resolution, and instead to offer it to God and see what might open from an intentional bearing of the tension even just a little longer than what we might normally be willing to do. Let's ponder it in our hearts...Jesus was masterful at this kind of pondering, this sitting within the tension. If you find it too hard to sit within the tension of a particular situation without moving immediately to resolution then try calling upon his name to help you. There is great untapped power and strength promised to us there in Jesus' name... and then may the tensions we are each living with be recognized as the birth pangs that will eventually bear forth what is most noble inside of us – compassion, forgiveness and love.