

Sermon for February 20, 2022 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel  
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany Year C  
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church – Chicago, Illinois

---

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all.

As I looked around the room earlier this week, I couldn't help but think, "Wow. We look awful." My friends, arriving in various states of disarray, filled a kitchen table for a night that was meant to be a respite. This moment of pause to share a meal and drink a bottle of wine came in the midst of too many hours spent hunched over a computer screen, solving the gamut of the world's problems from big business data analytics to the mine fields of non-profit idealism. But the thing that we all had in common as we shuffled into my apartment was that we looked tired. I mean TIREED.

As I pointed this out to my friends in a manner that would later be called tactless, I posed the question of why we do this in the first place. Why we work the way we do. Why we live the way we do. After throwing around phrases like financial stability, social impact, and "let's just buy a communal camper van," we landed in the squishy gray place one often lands these days. Standing firmly in the both/and. The place of running off into the woods to work a remote job from the side of a mountain and also having enough to maybe retire someday. In the place of loving the world as it is today and planning for the world of tomorrow. Having one foot firmly planted in this life, this day, this opportunity to do and be something beautiful, and the other in the potential of what is to come.

These days we live in the gray. Find me something that is actually 100% black and white and I will show you a million shades of gray that create the fabric of our lives. We are getting a lot of practice in the both/and in between spaces as we yearn for and force the certainty of the black and white. It is easy to think that we live in an unprecedented time. That the pulling in multiple directions at once is unique to us. But our scripture today reminds us that that is simply not the case. The both/and is a requisite of the human condition. It is, in fact, a key characteristic of our salvation.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he seems to be attempting to answer the very black and white, immediate questions of the new Christians of his day which also happen to be the perpetual questions that sit with us today. What happens in the afterlife? What will our bodies look like? His response is an exasperated sigh and fierce scolding as he tells the story of a new creation in our salvation that embodies the both/and. Intertwining the physical, human existence with the heavenly kingdom of God, Paul is reminding us that even though the stark either/or is tempting, our salvation is not just about the next life. It is wrapped up in the physicality and historical nature of this one. Paul says, "Just as we are borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven." You cannot have life without the reality of death. You cannot have heaven without the complexity of earth. You are inherently both/and.

This truth is taken to the next level as Jesus, the one who is the literal embodiment of the both/and, sets off on a course to teach us about the counter-intuitive nature of our humanity and

salvation. This passage from Jesus is confusing at best upon first read. It doesn't make sense to our capitalist and individualistic mind set and let me tell you, it didn't make sense to his original audience either. Love those who seek to hurt you. Show openness to those who seek to defraud you. Stay kind and soft in the face of all of the hardships this life has to offer you. In the world that we live in, this doesn't make a ton of practical sense. From a young age, we are sold the importance of getting ahead in life financially and socially, of protecting one's self and the fortune one has earned, of retribution in the face of wrong-doing. But to disregard these classic teachings is to live in the in between. The both/and of our salvation. Jesus is telling us to face the reality of this life head on, with all of its heartaches and all of its terrors. But to do so in a way that embodies the ideals of the salvation that is to come. The kingdom of God is at hand, but you cannot skip over this life to get there. The task that Jesus lays before us is really hard. Face the world as it is with an eye on the world as it will and should be when it is created anew in our salvation. Both are true. Both are important. Both deserve care.

As this tired gaggle of millennials sat around the kitchen table contemplating our fate within capitalism and a pandemic and the world as it is, we asked of our selves the questions that I think so many of us are asking these days. Is this how I want to live my life? One friend (a pastor, no less) even went so far as to quote Mary Oliver by asking, "what is your plan to do with this one wild and precious life?" There is no right way to do this. No path that will take you the direct route or give you perfection. But our God invites us into a mode of being, a way of being present and hopeful. Invest in the world as it is. Your world right now, in this moment. Contemplate the mess. Take the breaks. Hug the people you love often, even and especially the ones who frustrate you the most. And as you do this, know that this is not the end. The hard moments and the joy will all come to a natural close and salvation looms near. And right in between, there we stand. Straddling the here and now and the reality of what comes next. Both are powerful and beautiful and deeply intertwined. The shades of gray that make us who we are and who God is calling us to be.

Amen.