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Judges 6:36-40
The Ambiguous Truth

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The book of Judges Chapter 6 verses 36-40.

Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.' And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

Recently I read a book by Richard Niebuhr called *Christ in Culture*; in the book Neibuhr outlines five different typologies for how the church might engage the culture. After slugging through each of his five typologies I got to the concluding chapter only to read that he sees all five models to be equally valuable. I am not going to lie...I was a little bit annoyed. Certainly, one of them must be right...at least more right than the others. I did not just read three hundred pages of theological jargon to be left with an ambiguous model for cultural engagement...what a waste of time!

Perhaps you have had this same feeling, getting to the end of a book and not having had your questions answered or watching a movie that leaves you hanging...knowing that you never are going to know what happened in the end. Or the season finale of your favorite TV show instead of wrapping up a years worth of suspense simply prolongs the agony, with a blank screen telling you to tune in next season to see what happens. If you are anything like me you find this sort of thing frustrating. We generally do not like this kind of ambiguity. Ambiguity is pretty much a pejorative term and something we work to eliminate if at all possible. We like straight answers, we like clarity, and we like resolution.

Gideon knew the feeling. He hated being unsure, he hated ambiguity. Gideon was a military commander who had led successful conquests in the past but decisiveness was not his strong suit. At times he felt trapped and immobilized by the confusion of it all. The Israelites had been in exile and Gideon was supposed to set them free...or at least he thought he was supposed to set them free, but how could he really be sure? So he asked God for a sign, a short clear sound bite, a message written in the clouds, a burning bush, something to dispel the ambiguity and make his decision easier.

Gideon made a proposal to God, he said to God, “I am going to put this piece of cloth on the ground, and when I wake up tomorrow morning I want the piece of cloth to be wet but the ground around it to be dry. If you show me this sign I will know you are telling me to free the Israelites. So the next morning, the cloth was wet and the ground was dry. Great, good, let’s go get those Israelites.” Right? Well no, that wasn’t quite good enough for Gideon. Although he had just seen something pretty miraculous, how could he know it was not just a coincidence? So Gideon sheepishly went to God again asking for ANOTHER sign. This time he wanted the ground to be wet but the cloth to be dry. Talk about high maintenance!

But criticize Gideon too much and we might have to confess we too have played these games with God. Asking for signs to make things clearer...if you will just give me a sign that this is the job I am supposed to take. If you will just give me a sign that I am doing the right thing. If you will just give me a sign that this is the person for me. If you will just give me a sign that you forgive me. If you will just me a sign that everything is going to be ok.

It is natural to do this sort of thing. It is natural to be uncomfortable with ambiguity. It is natural to want certainty and to seek answers, especially in the difficult times of our lives when the world just seems to work against logic or against its natural order. But sometimes we are so afraid of the questions that we stop asking them, we give up too easily, or we accept truths that when examined closely do not make much sense at all.

Did Gideon really need to play this game with God or was he just trying to get away from the answer he had already been given? In the New Interpreters Bible Commentary it says, “Gideon’s initial military victories against the Midianite enemies are impressive, but Gideon is also cowardly, hesitant, and often doubtful of God’s ability to accomplish what God has promised.”¹ Instead of seeing him as a courageous, faithful servant of God we see a glimpse of Gideon as a bit of a coward, a bit hesitant, scared of commitment, terrified of death, and overly self-conscious. Why was he unable to have faith without the miraculous signs? Why did he go to so much effort to get the simple answer? Maybe it was because Gideon could not cope with the ambiguity.

There is a Christian education course that came out of England called the Alpha course. The Alpha course has been hugely popular in the UK and in the US because it realizes how much we loathe ambiguity. It realizes how much we are like Gideon. The Alpha course breaks down Christianity into simple truth statements until there is no room left to question...simple answers given to complex theological questions. While for some people that might be comforting or beneficial for others it is simply stifling. Thomas Merton, a Catholic theologian and poet, said this: “The very obscurity of faith is an argument for its perfection. It is darkness to our minds because it so far transcends their weakness. The more perfect faith is, the darker it becomes. The closer we get to God, the less is our faith diluted with the half-light of created images and concepts.”² Merton’s understanding of faith requires ambiguity. Carl Jung said similarly, “Ambiguity creates the kind of space necessary for the possibility of faith.”³

¹ New Interpreters Commentary Volume II, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN), p. 791.

² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New Directions, New York, New York, 1961), p. 134.

³ Cote, Richard G., *Re-Visioning Mission – The Catholic Church and Culture in Postmodern America*, (Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1996), p. 169.

It is not that ambiguity and faith cannot coexist but rather that they must. We simply cannot claim to have all of the answers. It is one of the things that constantly keeps me humble as I study theology, the more I learn the more I realize there is to learn. It is trite but it is true. Theology is the study of God and the more you acknowledge that God is not simple or transparent the more you realize how little you know about God. As one minister friend of mine put it about studying theology...”you know more and more about less and less until pretty soon you know absolutely everything about absolutely nothing.” His joking and slightly cynical comment contrasts the model for studying theology in order to “get” all of the answers. Faith is a process of growing into our understanding and relationship with God. It does not happen when get the right answers. It does not happen over night. It does not happen to just the holy chosen few.

Does it mean there are no answers? No. Does it mean that God will not provide signs like Gideon received? Not necessarily. Does it mean it is not worth the struggle? Certainly not. For it is in the struggle, the mysterious wrestling where we find ourselves and we find God. Jung’s words ring true, “ambiguity provides the space for faith.”

Jesus allowed for the space of ambiguity and the possibility of faith for those around him. People came to faith by discovering who he was on their own and by seeing who they could be if they followed him. Jesus spoke in parables, which were often the pinnacle of ambiguity. I mean is the prodigal son really about the son, the father, the other brother, God or what? Or what about the disciples asking Jesus who he was and Jesus answered their question with a question...who do people say that I am? Just tell us. I can feel the frustration of the disciples. Or what about when Jesus on the Damascus road, risen from the dead and yet inconspicuously walking along the road with his friends. These are all just a few examples of the way Jesus chose to embrace ambiguity. He forced those around him to think for themselves, to take responsibility for their faiths and decide how to enact their own sense of Christian mission.

Jesus knew, what we try to forget, that truth does not usually come prepackaged in short sound bites with tidy endings. If we want a faith that is our own and authentic we must work at discovering truth in God’s presence around us. We must work at faith as we try to make sense of a world that does not operate in black and white. That gift of reasoning and wrestling with life and faith is what makes us human. Do not let anyone take that humanity away from you by settling for simple answers. Paulo Freire one of the great reformers of education said that, “Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern man is his domination by the force of these myths and his manipulation by organized advertising, ideological or otherwise. Gradually, without even realizing the loss, he relinquishes his capacity for choice; he is expelled from the orbit of decisions.⁴” This is what Gideon did to himself, he did not seek faith in a living God, he sought a simple answer from a distant God.

Do not let anyone take away your capacity for choice or your ability to make decisions, especially when it comes to finding God and living out your faith. Do not accept others faith

⁴ Freire, Paulo. *Education: The Practice of Freedom*. (Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, London, England, 1974), p. 6.

hand-me-downs but work to find a faith of your own. Seek truth and try not to be persuaded by the sound bites offered by so many.

And the next time you find yourself in a frustrating place of ambiguity try to remember that it might be a wonderful opportunity to wrestle closer to God and God's truths. Ambiguity is not the enemy of faith; it is the catalyst for it!

The Word of the Lord. Amen.