

“Dynamics and Mechanisms”

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Isaiah 58:9-14

Luke 13:10-17

‘The Lord will always guide you and provide good things to eat when you are in the desert.

He will make you healthy.’

Isaiah 58:11^a

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to see passed a superficial compliance of being “Christian”
and may our life in the Spirit be joyfully dynamic.

Amen

The lesson from Isaiah seems fairly straight-forward in saying that
if we live good lives doing the right things, we will get what we need.
It suggests that there is a way things work in this world
and that by following that “Way”, it can work for you.

Living in a religiously diverse and culturally pluralistic world as we do,
it seems like there are actually a lot of choices –
especially if you believe that there is only one God
who is somehow at work in them all.

Then there’s science and its applications through technology.
What if science and religion put away their centuries old rivalry
and worked together...

*Perhaps you heard it was reported that Microsoft is considering the acquisition
of the Catholic Church – then again, perhaps you haven’t heard that.
Historically, the Church has a reputation as an aggressive competitor,
leading crusades as a market ploy to get people to upgrade to Catholicism,
and entering licensing arrangements with various kingdoms
such that all subjects get the same software package –
whether they use it or not.*

*Today, Christianity is available in several denominations,
but the Catholic version is still the most widely used.*

*Pope Francis will still be on the Board of Directors,
meanwhile CEO, Bill Gates, described Microsoft’s long-term strategy as
a scalable networking program that will support all religions
through path emulation.*

*A single core religion will be offered, but with a choice of interfaces
according to one’s preferred religious style.*

<http://www.ahajokes.com/reg40.html>

Willard, p.2

The idea of Microsoft merging with the Church sounds a little too...
practical, maybe a little too *mechanical*, doesn't it?

Wouldn't such a combination be in conflict with
the *dynamics* of what the Church is really about?

Dynamics and mechanisms – I have never heard it put this way before,
but I want to borrow these two common terms to explain
how I see our Bible and religious tradition can be interpreted.

A definition for “dynamic” as a noun, is:

a pattern or process of change, growth, or activity.

A definition for “mechanism” as in “mechanical”, is:

done as if by a machine : seemingly uninfluenced by the mind or emotions.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

The difference between

the literal interpretation of the Bible

as a mechanical response to God's Holy Word –

like ‘women shouldn't speak in church’,

and the subjective interpretation of the Bible

as a dynamic reflection, asking “What Would Jesus Do?”

is what I am referring to as “mechanisms” and “dynamics”.

An example of a “mechanism” is the conflict between Jesus and his opponents
like the scribes and Pharisees, the lawyers and Sadducees.

In today's Gospel lesson,

that mechanism is evident in the conflict that arises

between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue

when he does work on the Sabbath, healing a woman.

Jesus' opponent squares off in a mechanistic or impersonal defense of tradition
while Jesus challenges that tradition with the dynamic of compassion.

This mechanism of judgment is translatable – like a parable.

We can see it at work in the news, in our social interactions, in ourselves...

The very people who say the Bible is to be taken literally, yet condemn others,
don't see how they are imitating those reviled Pharisees of long ago.

The dynamic of God's love is also translatable as the lesson we should learn
and the example we should imitate.

You have heard me speak of contemporary theologian, Rene Girard,
who has some very important insights –

not only about the story of Jesus' crucifixion, but the whole Bible.

Girard describes what he calls the ‘single victim mechanism’ –

which arises when envy and competition lead to escalating violence
until it is temporarily ended when a scapegoat is sacrificed.

Willard, p.3

The 'myth of sacred violence' is another such mechanism that seeks to legitimize violent retribution.

A righteous hero like David defeats an evil enemy like Goliath in combat and goes on to be a mighty warrior and leader for Israel.

This is the formula for most action movies and video games these days and mythic stories for thousands of years.

A literal understanding of this passage could be used to justify war instead of seeing it in the context of a brutal era with few options.

But later David as King of Israel, stands before his people and declares,

...God said to me,

'You may not build a house for my name,

for you are a warrior and have shed blood.'

1 Chronicles 28:3

That task would go to David's son, Solomon.

Still, the story of David and Goliath is an important metaphor

The lesson we should take away from this story is

not that we should solve all our problems by hurting or killing,

but that we can face the "giants" in our lives.

Another mechanism is cultural or ethnic purity which when taken to extreme,

leads to prejudice against those who are not considered "pure" –

this is evident in the tribal wars of Israel with its neighbors,

in how women are treated throughout the Bible,

and especially in the Gospel stories about the Samaritans.

Then, there is the doctrine of 'Original Sin' – even though applying to everyone,

it serves as a familiar mechanism for keeping 'us' separate from 'them'.

These mechanisms found in the Bible can also be seen at work

throughout the Church's history and American history as well –

they are true to life and true in our lives

as we are alternately victim and perpetrator –

until the blinders are taken away.

Jesus himself was subjected to prejudice as a Jew who very likely was bullied,

growing up in the Samaritan town of Nazareth,

but was then despised by Galilean Jews because he was from Nazareth.

Jesus was in a constant power struggle with various groups

that were threatened by his popularity and influence,

as he flaunted the mechanical adherence to Sabbath laws.

Eventually, he was singled out as a scapegoat

and those who crucified him on a cross, believed they were right to do so.

These mechanisms blinded those who opposed Jesus –

just as they blind us when we scapegoat and condemn somebody else.

Willard, p.4

It is hard to see these mechanisms – especially, when we are caught up in them, but there are dynamics at work, too.

The spiritual *dynamics* of grace, hospitality, empathy, healing, forgiveness, salvation, social transformation, advocacy of the least of these, and – with regard to family values, the most important of all is adoption through baptism even as it applies to loving your enemy.

All of these dynamics are derived from faith, hope, and love.

Like those treacherous mechanisms, it is not easy to see the dynamics, but they are there if you are willing to look until you do see them.

Jewish storyteller, Emily Harris, says that the Bible was written with “black fire” and “white fire” – with what is said in ink letters and with what is left unsaid between the lines.

Feminist and other liberation theologians, have often found their voice in that territory between the lines of what can be implied about God’s will.

Nancy Bell – our resident liberation activist, has urged me to continue to preach about the “Beloved Community”.

It is a term that comes from the Civil Rights era – especially in the writings and the sermons of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, who so eloquently expressed his vision in the “I Have a Dream” speech 50 years ago this week, that it led to led to voting rights reform legislation.

For me – this term has come to mean what Jesus meant when he preached about the Kingdom of God – a social reality that is possible on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Our conservative, fundamentalist Christian brothers and sisters are more likely to speak of the ‘Kingdom’ in terms of ‘the Body of Christ’. though politically, their vision and understanding of this concept is very different from a progressive view.

I know Christians who believe the world was created in seven 24 hour days, and if you are not ‘saved’, you are not getting into Heaven.

But I have known hospitality from those same people – that their hearts are not hardened by a mechanistic faith.

I have seen firsthand their love as a living dynamic, and as missionaries they have been committed for three generations to bringing the Good News of the Word of God to such places as postwar Japan, Turkey, and now, Cuba and Albania.

Willard, p.5

Last week, I heard the privilege of hearing Brian McLaren
speak at the Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers.

Last year he was the guest speaker at our Conference Annual Meeting.

He is an evangelical who came from conservative roots,
but he has become a voice of 'emerging' progressive Christianity.

McLaren himself embraces the dynamics of radical welcome,
interfaith dialogue, advocacy for social and environmental concerns –
which is what the United Church of Christ is already doing.

He also praised the Network of Biblical Storytellers
for reclaiming the Bible's prophetic message
in order to tell it in new ways to reach a new generation.

It is through these stories that we encounter Jesus Christ –
and as Brian McLaren put it, we find it is not so much that
"Jesus is like God", but that "God is like Jesus" and
this "God doesn't demand blood" – this "God gives blood".

This is a different dynamic than the angry God that requires
a mechanistic compliance with laws.

From our lesson today through the Prophet Isaiah,
God is saying that if we live good lives doing the right things,
we will get what we need despite our outward circumstances
when we are in 'the desert'.

It suggests that there is a way things work in this world
and that by following that "Way" it can work for you.

As it says in Isaiah 58:13^a

But first, you must start respecting the Sabbath as a joyful day of worship.

A literal, mechanical response to this call to honor the Sabbath
would be superficial compliance,

but the clue to what the dynamic is about is in the word 'joyful'.

God wants us to be joyful! God wants us to joyfully serve.

*We shall overcome, we shall overcome, We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, We shall overcome someday.*

*The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, We shall overcome someday.*

*We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace, We shall live in peace someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, We shall live in peace someday.*

http://www.lyricsfreak.com/v/various+artists/we+shall+overcome_10170009.html

Amen

Isaiah 58:9-14

9 When you beg the Lord for help, he will answer,
“Here I am!”

Don't mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel.

10 Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless.

Then your light will shine in the dark;

your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun.

11 The Lord will always guide you and provide good things to eat
when you are in the desert.

He will make you healthy.

You will be like a garden that has plenty of water

or like a stream that never runs dry.

12 You will rebuild those houses left in ruins for years;

you will be known as a builder and repairer of city walls and streets.

13 But first, you must start respecting the Sabbath as a joyful day of worship.

You must stop doing and saying whatever you please on this special day.

14 Then you will truly enjoy knowing the Lord.

He will let you rule from the highest mountains

and bless you with the land of your ancestor Jacob.

The Lord has spoken!

Luke 13:10-17

[10] Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

[11] And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

[12] And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her,
"Woman, you are freed from your infirmity."

[13] And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.

[14] But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people,
"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day."

[15] Then the Lord answered him,
"You hypocrites!

Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?

[16] And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?"

[17] As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.