



I have my suspicions

Vicki M. Kabat
Associate Director,
Center for Family and Community Ministries



Reed Avellette Photo

As children, we learned “Jesus loves me” and “Be kind to one another.” Then, as adults, we stumble onto “I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand” (Deut. 32:39, NRSV). That’s a rough transition for anyone to make. If the God of the New Testament is so loving, how can the God of the Old Testament be so, well, mean?

And that’s usually the order in which we learn it: warm and tender God first, scary and capricious God second. It makes most of us scurry back to the latter portion of our Bibles, never to venture out again.

Yet, the scriptures are full of such inconsistencies, and not just from one testament to the other. How are we to understand and depend upon such an incomprehensible deity or the texts that are to be our guide?

Library shelves are filled with attempts by scholars and theologians to answer that question. It is as sincere an inquiry for them as my 3-year-old son’s question was to him long ago when he asked me, “If God is everywhere, is he in my toenail?” We want logical answers. Mystery and metaphor, poetry and psalmody are so inconclusive.

Because I have no answers, I’ve decided contradictions aren’t so bad. The realization that there can be more than one “right” and one “wrong” – yet all be encompassed by some overarching truth – epitomizes the essence of the “living Word” to me.

I am reading Walter Brueggemann’s *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*.^{*} Brueggemann is one of the leading Old Testament scholars of our day. Here is a man who not only stumbles into the canon, he sets up residence there. Thank God he does because he casts light on the path for the rest of us.

In referencing the Deuteronomy citation above, Brueggemann says such statements “invite [us] to life in the contradiction” (p. 49). He discusses the

^{*}Brueggemann, W. *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*. Fortress Press (Minneapolis), 2000.

“hermeneutics of suspicion” and notes that such examination of the canon can be instrumental and “needs to be understood dialectically, making way for the new that can only come in the wake of suspicion” (p. 44).

I’m not a seminarian or a theologian. I work in a university environment populated by both, so I tread lightly upon these waters that run so deep. My brief foray into seminary classes left me wondering how anyone’s faith could survive such rigorous intellectual and spiritual calisthenics.

Nevertheless, I loved those debates I had with my professors and classmates about belief, divinity and, yes, contradiction. The pure adrenaline rush that occurs when a new thought pops into your head like a corn kernel under enough heat. Making your point incontrovertibly, only to have it batted back at you, like a birdie over a badminton net. Such a mental workout could go on all night and end with a Grand Slam breakfast at Denny’s the next morning. It was invigorating and exhausting.

At some point, though, I understood that this was a debate without end. The thoughts and ideas – as necessary to us as the blood that flows in our bodies – were there to nourish and compel action – our spiritual muscles, our living out of the Word. Put another way, the rubber *will* meet the road.

When I later worked on a church staff, I had to turn those X-treme Games of seminary into Survivor reality. I was a Christian educator at a small church, one-third of a staff that included a part-time secretary and custodian. The great questions of faith and life did not cease to exist for the church’s members just because we had no pastor, so they sometimes came to me – the only one in the office after 2 p.m. I was so ill-prepared. I remember sitting across from an earnest parishioner who was asking me, “How could a loving God allow his only son to be tortured and killed?” I was stunned – not at the question, but that someone thought I would have an answer, maybe that anyone would have “the” answer.

What I learned at that moment, and have found to be true since, is that there is great value in the phrase, “I don’t know.” I don’t say that flippantly. In fact, the more I learn, the more I realize how little I *do* know.

As I sat with the person asking me that ques-

tion, I prayed silently to God, “Please let me know what to say and what *not* to say.” It may be one of the most important prayers I’ve ever prayed, and I still pray it. Knowing what *not* to say is perhaps the kindest – and most honest – response we can give to those who struggle with these deep, often impenetrable questions of faith.

There are no easy answers and there is no infallible proof. That asks of faith what is impossible of it. To ask for or provide either – or to think you can – is the opposite of faith.

But I do value the question, the “suspicion” as Brueggemann describes it. I think God delights in the question. It is engagement, conversation, relationship. I rage at God, I implore God, I wrestle with God, as surely as Jacob did. But I am there, and God is there with me.

I told the woman that day, as we sat in the dimly lit Fellowship Hall together, that I didn’t know the answer to her question, but that I would travel with her as we searched for the answer.

Thomas Merton in the prologue to *No Man is an Island*, speaks of anxiety as a mark of spiritual insecurity. “One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask,” he writes.

We must ask, and then “live into the question,” as the poet Rilke says. Poets again! But what else is faith? Although we may understand little now, we will come to another kind of “knowing” – an eternal conversation with our Creator in which new understanding pops into our minds like blossoms from a bud in time-elapse photography.

Whether we’re looking for God in our toenail or in our spirit, in the pages of the canon or the Gospel, always the Scripture – the “living” Word – is there, batting the ideas back and forth with us, “making way for the new.” What other religious text does this?

My spirit and my life are full of contradictions, but each has something to teach me, if I choose to pay attention. That our Creator would encourage us to engage in this exchange – and out of it enable us to comprehend new perspectives of truth – is astounding.

As any highly educated theologian *ought* to say: “How cool is that?!”