

Well, yes yes and no no (Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37)

I came into the world cursed with the ability to see all sides of an issue.

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February 10, 2017

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“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No.’”

This command has bothered me for a long time--probably more so since I’ve become a bishop. I came into the world cursed with the ability to see all sides of an issue. I was raised in a theological tradition that loves holding opposites in tension. And I am a judicatory leader of a progressive denomination in a conservative state.

If I were challenged, “Is it ‘yes, yes’ or ‘no, no,?’” I’m afraid my automatic response would be, “Well, yes and no.”

It was with a start, then, that I read the Gospel for this week and noticed for the first time that Jesus’ call to moral surgery is in the same pericope as his admonition to pick a clear Yes or No. “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.”

It was Harry Truman who said, “Give me a one-handed economist. All my economists say, ‘On the one hand . . . on the other.’”

How many times have people said the same of us as preachers or leaders? I have suggested that perhaps the church needs more one-handed bishops. We--judicatory

leaders of many stripes--are a bunch that feels often compelled both to challenge and to comfort. We say, "We face a crisis--we have to do something!" and then we bless complacency by saying, "Don't panic. We have glimmers of hope."

It's not just judicatory leaders who struggle with this, of course. It's the same in congregations. We are called to proclaim a life-saving, life-changing gospel, but we know the bills have to be paid. We strive to keep everyone on board.

Maybe we need to listen more closely to Jesus, and take his drastic admonition to heart. Maybe it's not only the hand that grabs the loot or gropes the neighbor or grips the weapon that needs to be cut off before it draws us to hell. Maybe it's the hand that suggests we be meticulously fair, that cheats justice by tipping its scales into balance, that tempts too often to say, "on the other hand"--maybe that's the one that needs to be removed.

The election stirred disbelief and anger, undiminished since the presidential inauguration. We who are called to the task of proclamation, particularly those of us called to minister to specific communities, are ever driven to the dual task of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable--literally a bipolar vocation.

It's been said that any time we draw a line, we need to know that Jesus is on the other side of it. His whole ministry, never short on calling out hypocrisy and injustice, nonetheless knew no bounds when it came to inviting *all* to experience the good news of repentance, forgiveness, and life. He stretched his arms wide to draw all people together. And we nailed him down for his trouble.

Certainly there are times--most of the time, even--when Paul's approach to the Corinthians provides an avenue for proclamation that compromises neither the community's wholeness nor the integrity of the gospel. As tempting as it must have been to endorse (or at least lean toward) the party of Paul, to suggest that maybe Apollo's folks were the ones who needed to get in line, Paul was smart enough, faithful enough, bold enough to say, "you're all wrong." He called both factions to repentance and reconciliation by pointing them not to the rightness of either side, but to the source and goal of all their lives--to God who gives the growth, to God whose field and building they are.

Thanks be to God for the opportunities and the courage to preach just that: we all have some shaping up to do.

Yet that resolution does not always exist. And the line between prudence and cowardice is frighteningly fine.

When does the time come to pluck out the eye that can see the other side, to cut off the ability to say, “on the other hand”?

When does our careful equivocation threaten to preserve the whole body from division, and in the process drag it into a hell of paralysis in a time that calls for action?

We face hard questions and challenging times.

Yes, yes. Or no, no. Choose life when the call to action comes.