

## ARE YOU VIBRATING YET?

August 17, 2014  
Midland UCC

Matthew 15:10-28  
John 7:1-13

I wonder if the local newspaper would publish a column titled “Jesus Lies”. I wonder how folks might react to being told that Jesus discriminated against foreigners. There is a considerable theological history about the Christ being unchanging from generation to generation, so what might people make of the notion that Jesus is reported to have changed his mind? You might have noticed that we have such things being reported in our scripture lessons for this morning. At the end of the gospel according to John, the writer tells us that “there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” In other words, John is telling us that his gospel contains a selection of Jesus’ teachings and actions. In the ancient world scrolls were a rather pricey commodity. They could be obtained in a more or less standard length. The gospels that we have can each be written on one scroll, thus economizing and making the sharing of those scrolls easy. On top of that, early writers did not put spaces between words or use punctuation because such things waste precious space. When we consider these realities, the selection of materials that writers choose to incorporate in their narratives becomes even more critical. In the light of these realities, why in the world would we find reports of Jesus discriminating against people or of him lying to his brothers? I’ll come back to this in a bit.

My intention this morning is to challenge you to think about things from a theological perspective. In order to do that, it might help if I would clarify some

terminology. We might start with the word “belief.” This word implies certainty about things. When we tell someone that we believe them, we are endorsing their statements. When we say that we believe in God, we are expressing certainty about the reality of God. The word “faith” usually emphasizes people’s willingness to trust in the validity of certain concepts (like love or truthfulness or commitment). I find that there is often a lot of confusion about how these words get used. In the hands of many Christians, belief gets equated with certainty. Hence we have folk investing 27 million dollars in the construction of a creation museum which is designed to demonstrate certain beliefs some people hold with great certainty leading them to conclude that obviously dinosaurs and humans inhabited this planet simultaneously, even though contemporary science says otherwise. These people are certain that the world is about 8,000 years old. Over 250,000 people visit this monument to certitude every year. There is indeed still an active organization called the Flat Earth Society which believes against all challenges that the earth is a flat disc.

Our desire for certainty in a world that keeps changing at a faster and faster pace can entice us to believe in certainty. Many of us don’t like the idea that Jesus might change his mind or that ancient views of cosmology might be wrong. But the quest for certainty can lead to illusions which can easily become delusions or even hallucinations. The flat earth society seems to me to have pushed their beliefs beyond delusions about reality into hallucinations—in which people see things no one else sees. Less you think I am being silly, I want you to know that the flat earth society is still active and has a new logo promoted last year which shows the earth as a disc resembling the picture on the UN flag. They believe the North Pole is the center of the world and that the edges

are surrounded by a 150 foot tall wall of ice. They also are telling us that the sun and the moon are each 32 miles in diameter!

We can also see a conflict of belief in the turmoil in Ferguson, Missouri where both sides in this horrible confrontation are declaring conflicting beliefs and supporting those beliefs with other beliefs that may, in some cases, be totally extraneous to the issues at hand. We may find the beliefs asserted by the Flat Earth people to be amusing, but no one is amused by the powder keg of racial tension in Ferguson.

Faith, on the other hand, as famously defined in the Biblical letter to the Hebrews, is said to be “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith describes an attitude, a perspective and is not driven, like belief, to demonstrate certainty. Faith is often content to be intuitive about the nature of things without having to create artificial or elaborate truths.

A recent issue of Time magazine featured an article about atheists who have apparently created an atheist church. I find it an interesting commentary on our times that we have the rise of an atheist church in the same century and in the same country as the construction of the Creation Museum. I suspect that the perspectives that drive each of these organizations derive from an effort to resolve doubts that have been raised about many traditional beliefs. One group accepts the questions raised by doubt as issues of certainty while the other group seems to ascribe to the advice once given to a preacher about his sermon—when your point is weak, shout!

Faith on the other hand engages in a dialog with doubt. It doesn't attack people who raise questions because it understands that the development of a spiritual perspective on life requires a dialog between faith and doubt. Faith understands, as did

the German philosopher Hegel, that a developing spiritual perspective is nurtured by a process that incorporates the contradictions often encountered between faith and doubt. If the opposing forces in Ferguson would each step back a bit and admit that there are some doubts about what happened there and some doubts about the hardened positions about race, then dialog could happen. Owning doubt might lead to an integration of concerns and lead to a more constructive approach to the underlying issues. Doubt could even facilitate honest and open grieving about the tragedy.

Back for a moment to the story of Jesus who called the Canaanite woman “a dog.” This is a very important, critical story not only because of its outcome but because Jesus engaged in a discussion with a woman, which religious teachers of his time were not supposed to do. She comes to him having heard of his ability to heal people seeking help for her daughter. At first Jesus ignores her, but his disciples who are getting sick of her persistent demands convince him to talk to her. He then tells her it is not fitting to throw the children’s food to the dogs. The woman is very clever. She doesn’t argue about being called a dog but says even dogs are entitled to the table scraps. Jesus is astounded at her faith and immediately grants her request. She raised doubts about the faith Jesus was professing and that led to an expansion of his faith as he was able to see that his ministry wasn’t just for people in Israel but was indeed for all who were willing to profess faith in his message. Clearly this story shows us one example of Jesus changing his mind in a way that shows us that his own faith and sense of ministry was a growing and changing spiritual perspective.

We see a similar illustration in the story we heard John tell us this morning. Jesus’ brothers are taunting him and pushing him to go to Judea for a religious feast

which comes in the fall of the year. Jesus is avoiding this trip for fear that he will be killed. His brothers, who apparently have their own doubts about their older brother, seem to be provoking a challenge which would either establish Jesus' truth or make a folly of his pretensions. Lots of younger brothers would like to make trouble for the big brother. So Jesus lies to them. He says he isn't going because the time isn't right. Then after they go off to the festival, he sneaks in behind them as an anonymous pilgrim and eventually preaches and stirs up a whole host of doubts amongst the folk who heard him. Or perhaps Jesus didn't lie at all. It seems more likely that Jesus changed his mind—again he changed his mind when he was compelled to deal with the doubts his brothers had about his ministry.

Here we have two clear instances of Jesus dealing with the doubts others raised, doubts which the positions of others raised in his own mind about how he understood his ministry.

Hegel, whom I mentioned a moment ago, is famous for his understanding that each thesis generates an antithesis. The contradiction between thesis and antithesis generates a new synthesis. Then of course the synthesis becomes a new thesis, and off we go again from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Hegel's view of things has suffered because Karl Marx used his ideas to promote communism. However, Hegel is not about communism. Indeed as he saw what is called the dialectical movement, it became a process which developed into ever more complex and sophisticated perspectives by incorporating the contradictions between both thesis and antithesis into ever more spiritual perspectives. He had faith that this process would lead to a comprehensive, evolving unity.

If we think about an alternation between opposites, images like pendulums and vibrations come to mind. The Latin root for the word “doubt” means to vibrate! The word vibrant, which of course comes from vibrate, means that something is throbbing with energy and life. It is a short step to understand that to be alive is to vibrate. If we are going to profess a vibrant spiritual life, we’re going to be vibrating between faith and doubt.

Things that vibrate often produce sounds: music is a collection of vibrations. What vibrates might change—it might be a piano string or a violin string; a harp or the reed in a clarinet; it might be a human voice or the head of a drum or the column of air in an organ pipe, or some wine glasses. If this community of faith gets involved in sharing the doubts and faiths of many people, there will be vibrations. If my doubt encounters your faith and we allow ourselves to be articulate about it, our vibration will produce a new synthesis. If your doubt pushes against my faith, we may discover a way to vibrate together. In so doing, we will be incorporating into our community the same process Jesus used to nurture his own spiritual life. The confidence he thought he had was challenged by the Canaanite woman who raised doubts and the resultant vibration helped Jesus to revise his vision and her daughter to get the needed healing. The original very limited view Jesus had of the people to whom he was called to prophesy was forced to grow into a more encompassing perspective. The vessel of fear that kept Jesus from challenging Jerusalem got busted by the vibrations of doubt that his brothers expressed and consequently Jesus’ own courage grew.

The vibrations of faith and doubt dancing together in this community, in any community, can produce sounds of challenge and joy, acceptance and growth,

confidence and connection. We know that we will never be alone even though we are free to wonder, to question and to contribute to the music by expressing our doubts as well as our faith. Indeed, if we understand the critical place doubt plays in spiritual growth we might well acknowledge that we have a duty to doubt just as we have the privilege of sharing our faith. Any musician can testify to the fact that the full power of music is made possible by the blending a sounds—even dissident sounds—into one harmonious whole. Come into this community to grow your faith and deepen your doubts so that together we may find a song that celebrates life, love, truth and joy and sends waves of nurturing vibrations all over this city and indeed all around this world.