

THE WISDOM OF PARADOX
Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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In honor of the Jewish holiday Hanukkah which began this past Wednesday, I want to light the menorah this morning, realizing that these candles are more properly lit at sundown on each of the eight days of this Festival of Lights. Do you recall the story behind Hanukkah? Let me fill in some of the details of this dramatic story.

During the 2nd century BCE, Judea was controlled by the Seleucid Empire based in Syria. Some of the Jews—particularly those of the urban upper class—wanted to dispense with traditional Jewish law and adopt a more sophisticated Greek lifestyle. When Antiochus IV became ruler of the Seleucid Empire, he initiated an aggressive campaign to eliminate Jewish religious practices altogether, including the placement of a statue of the Greek god Zeus in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. In response to this affront to their religious tradition, a small group of insurrectionists known as the Maccabees mounted a campaign of guerilla warfare that eventually forced the Syrians and their allies to withdraw from Judea.

The Jewish festival of Hanukkah celebrates the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. After destroying the statue of Zeus, the victorious Maccabees were determined to re-light the sacred candelabra in the Temple, but they could find only a small jug of oil that had not been contaminated by pagan hands. Even though the jug contained only enough oil for one day, it miraculously lasted for eight days, by which time more sacred oil could finally be obtained. Whether it is taken literally or metaphorically, Hanukkah celebrates the preservation of the Jewish faith and the spirit of resilience that has sustained Jewish people in the face of enormous adversity throughout their history. The menorah candles symbolize the triumph of the light of faith over the dark forces of religious oppression. As today's choir piece expresses it, "Don't let the light go out, it's lasted for so many years. Don't let the light go out, let it shine through our love and our tears."

Even as we celebrate the powerful imagery of Hanukkah, there is another side of this story that deserves our attention. As with so many other stories in human history, there is another side—a **darker** side—that we should not ignore. The tactics used by the Maccabean insurgents were relentless and often brutal—involving murder and assassination, nighttime attacks against villages, and the killing of other Jews whom they considered traitors to their cause. In today's terms, they would be regarded as militant **insurrectionists**. Even after the Maccabees had successfully overcome their foreign adversaries, they continued to employ many of the same violent tactics in their internal power struggles that they had used in fighting their external enemies. What had begun as a religious resistance movement turned into a relentless pursuit of political and economic power. Some of the Maccabees wanted to conquer other nearby territories and "convert" the residents to Judaism. In a final ironic twist to this story, the people of Idumea, a region south of Judea, were **forced** to adopt Judaism. The victims of religious oppression had themselves become oppressors.

There are some historians who consider the Maccabean revolt as primarily a **civil war**—a struggle for power between rural Jewish traditionalists and those living in Jerusalem who wanted to adopt the more “modern” religion of the Greeks. What had begun as an internal religious conflict was transformed into a war of national liberation when the Syrian leader decided to take sides in the conflict. Were the Maccabees heroic martyrs or religious extremists? Probably a bit of both.

My goal in telling you the other side of this story is **not** to undermine the symbolic meaning of Hanukkah as a celebration of religious resilience, but rather to illustrate a larger point: **there are at least two sides to almost every dramatic story—including our own life stories.** Each of us contains a bundle of apparent contradictions and paradoxes. Among psychologists, no one appreciated the significance of internal paradoxes and contradictions more than Carl Jung. Unlike Freud, who believed that the conflicts among different parts of the psyche was unending and often self-destructive, Jung believed that “the tensions that are created by polarization of opposing forces, while potentially harmful, are nonetheless necessary for the development of the psyche. Without them, there would be no psyche.” Within each of us there is a creative tension between conscious and unconscious, between feminine (anima) and masculine (animus) qualities, between extraversion and introversion, and so on. “Opposites can *unite* to form a synthesis or wholeness in which they come to complement one another. It is through this kind of balancing of opposites . . . that the personality becomes fully integrated. ” [Duane Schultz, *Theories of Personality* (2nd ed., p. 70)]

Jung’s version of Catch 22 is this: We must acknowledge the existence of these internal paradoxes or else they will cause turmoil and unhappiness. A few weeks ago, I spoke about the importance of what Jung called the **shadow**—the often embarrassing side of our personality that we hide from ourselves and from others. The more vehemently we deny the paradoxes that lie within us, the more they will unconsciously influence our behavior and our relationships. For Jung, the balancing of opposites is a spiritual challenge. “Oddly enough,” he writes, “the paradox is one of our most valued spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness. Hence a religion becomes inwardly impoverished when it loses or cuts down its paradoxes; but their multiplication enriches because only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.” [quoted in *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. by V. S. de Laszlo, p. 446]

Among the world’s wisdom traditions, none expresses paradox more eloquently than **Taoism**. The *Tao Te Ching* is loaded with passages that express paradox. Here is one example:

Fullness and emptiness give birth to each other.
 Difficult and easy complete each other.
 Long and short shape each other.
 Tones and voice harmonize with each other.
 Front and back follow each other.
 Therefore wherever the sage is, he dwells among affairs by not-doing.
 He teaches without words.
 The ten-thousand things arise, but he doesn’t impel them.
 He gives birth, but he doesn’t possess.
 He acts, but he doesn’t rely on what he has done.

He has successes, but he doesn't claim credit.

So, by not claiming credit, he is never empty. [chap. 2, trans. by Thomas H. Miles] In commenting on this passage, Stanley Herman writes, "Many people are reflexive partisans. They instantly compare, contrast, and form opinions for or against everything that comes over the horizon. They join causes and take positions. They wave their arms about politics, social issues, economics, ethics, and other people. Once a reflexive partisan takes a position or chooses a side, it becomes the flag of his ego. His own sense of victory or defeat, worthiness or worthlessness, becomes dependent on his cause. It is better not to set your stance too soon or champion it too adamantly. As time winds forward, there will be more to see than can be seen at present—but only if your eyes remain open." [*The Tao at Work*, p. 8]

Another master of paradoxical wisdom is Jesus of Nazareth. As New Testament scholar Marcus Borg explains, "Jesus often used the language of paradox and reversal to shatter the conventional wisdom of his time. Impossible combinations abound in his teaching. What kind of world is it in which a Samaritan—a heretic and impure person—can be 'good,' indeed be the hero of a story? What kind of world is it in which a Pharisee—typically viewed as righteous and pure—can be pronounced unrighteous and an outcast can be accepted? What kind of world is it in which riding a donkey can be a symbol of kingship, in which purity is a matter of the heart and not of external boundaries, in which the poor are blessed, the first are last and the last first, the humble exalted and the exalted humbled?" [*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 80]

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, he used paradoxical language. The Kingdom is something great and yet it compared to something small: a mustard seed. The Kingdom of God is for people who were considered "nobodies" in his time: children, social outcasts. As Borg says, "Many of those who expect to be in the Kingdom will find themselves shut out. Moreover, the Kingdom is not somewhere else; rather it is among you, inside you, outside you. Neither is it some time in the future, for it is here, spread out on the earth; people just do not see it. . . . Far from seeing wealth as a blessing from God for having lived wisely, Jesus saw it as preoccupation and idolatry: 'You cannot serve God and mammon [earthly wealth]. . . . No wonder those who were secure in the world of conventional wisdom found little worthwhile in his message, and much that was nonsensical, offensive, and threatening.'" [*ibid.*, pp. 81-82]

The wisdom of paradox challenges our desire for certainty and perfection. One of my favorite books is titled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, which is based mainly on the authors' experience working with alcoholics. "The spirituality of imperfection," they say, "begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake." [Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 5] "A central theme in all traditions of spirituality is the insistence that **honesty**—honesty with self about self—is essential to any spiritual quest. And the greatest, most treacherous **dishonesty** is the denial or refusal of our mixed human nature. . . . Openness to paradox allows both the understanding and the acceptance of our human condition as 'both/and' (both a saint and a sinner) rather than 'either-or' (either a saint or a sinner). The demand for 'either-or,' for one-or-the-other, signals the rejection of paradox and therefore the denial of spirituality." [p. 62]

Acknowledging the paradoxes in our own lives is the gateway to wholeness. I love G. K. Chesterton definition of paradox as "truth standing on her head to attract attention." [*ibid.*, p. 19]

Take a moment to fully appreciate that image. As Walt Whitman wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.” [*Song of Myself*, stanza 51] What are the paradoxes in your own life—especially the ones that you struggle with most often?