

THE BALANCING ACT

Seeing the sermon title, you are no doubt thinking about the various ways in which it is difficult to keep all the responsibilities, tasks, and calendar commitments clear, and how you must constantly adjust and readjust your time and efforts to keep up with everything.

A real issue, to be sure, but that is much too comfortable and tame a picture to match our reality. We keep trying to tell ourselves that with careful attention and reasonable thought and awareness, we will be able to keep up with it all, or at least get close enough. That is what we keep telling ourselves. But that is not the real situation.

So let's get real. Picture in your minds the real balancing act. We are on a high wire. If we fall off to the left, there are alligators about two hundred feet down. If we fall off on the right, there are sharp stakes sticking up waiting for us about three hundred feet down. We do have a pole to carry, which helps us to keep our balance. But turning around seems pointless, since we have been walking this tightwire for years. Therefore going back does not seem like an option. On the other hand, looking ahead we cannot see where the wire ends. We hope it is in some pleasant and beautiful place. But what we really know is that it stretches into what seems to us an endless distance – a far-off future.

Falling off on the left side into the alligators is what our world calls "disgrace." Falling off on the right side onto the stakes is what our world calls "failure." It's very strange, even weird, but most of the time our world sees death as a form of failure. How can something so normal and natural – something that awaits absolutely everybody – be considered a form of failure? Well, never mind.

So where are we? Is it an adventure, a challenge, an opportunity – or just scary as hell? It depends quite a lot on the mood we are in. In any case, here we are, and nobody asked us if we wanted to be here, at least not that we recall. Over the years, we have all learned some things about balancing and how to move forward on the wire. Yet no matter how proficient we become, it never takes away all the danger. We can get pretty confident along the way, at times, but storms come that make things really slippery. It can be hard to keep our balance in some of the winds that blow. In fact, it can be exceedingly difficult, and that's no exaggeration. We also keep getting older, and that changes our timing

and our balance. Some people keep trying to pretend this is not true, but it is true. We begin to realize that falling is not just a casual concern. It's only a matter of time.

However simplex this imagery, it reflects things that are true about our experience and about what life is like here on the physical level. I have not tried to fill out the imagery very much. There are of course others all around us, each of them trying to walk their tightwire too. Sometimes we reach out with our balancing pole to help steady someone if they are starting to lose their balance. Most of them recover quickly, and thank us. And we are really grateful when others do that for us.

However, from time to time we all run into people who thank us for trying to help by trying to knock us off the wire. Some even grab our pole, when we extend it, and try to yank us off into the chasm beneath. It's hard enough to keep our balance without people trying on purpose to make it harder. But there are those who seem so bent on getting rid of us – or causing others who are close to us to fall – that we end up using our balancing poles as weapons. It is, of course, even harder to keep our balance when we are in the middle of a fight. How insane, when we are all trying to keep our balance, that we sometimes find ourselves in such conflict. Understandably some of you don't want to think about this side of life. Besides, analogies can lose their appeal if we get into too many details.

In any case, this imagery is only about one dimension of our experience here. Most of us would agree that physical reality is not the only reality we find ourselves in. We have tasted and experienced physical reality, but we have also experienced spiritual reality. Many would claim that it is far more complicated than to speak of merely *two* dimensions. And I would quickly agree. How many dimensions are there to spiritual reality? But we are not trying to be thorough or accurate about the full or final truth. For the moment, suffice it to say that we live in a duality. Clearly there is more than one dimension here. Sometimes we talk of the spectrum between life and death; light and dark; good and evil; love and alienation; faith and fear. And we know times when we have been “transported,” for want of a better word, into awareness that can neither be explained nor defined by physical realities.

I confess that I am not very clear about when this “duality” became the common awareness and perspective in our world. For some people it is not clear even yet. But awareness of God has always made us

humans realize that there are dimensions beyond our own. A burning bush that does not burn up, for instance, challenges our notions of reality. Even so, some people can chalk up such things to miracles, for a while, without actually realizing that there is more than one dimension all around us.

A few individuals, like Samuel or Isaiah, may realize that there are dimensions beyond the physical, but that doesn't always filter down to the awareness or perspective of the majority or become part of the perspective of an entire culture. In other words, I am leading up to the comment that Christianity has always seen life in terms of dual dimensions, and without pretending that such perspective was invented by or is only true for Christians.

It is clear that Jesus saw the duality and took it very seriously. Some of you will just write this off as automatic because He was the Son of God. That doesn't explain such things for me. Jesus was aware of the duality from a very human perspective: from hours in prayer – from personal encounter with God, and with the dimensions beyond. Therefore, this perspective is available to me too. And yes, of course, for you as well.

While I suspect that quite a number of Greeks and Egyptians and Jews (among others) were indeed aware of spiritual realities in the first century A.D., it also seems obvious that most of the world was still not thinking in such terms very often or very clearly. I might be tempted to say the same thing about the twenty-first century. It is hard to imagine that vast numbers of us are aware of the spiritual dimensions or of spiritual realities and truth yet continue to make choices and shape our behavior almost entirely on the basis of physical perspectives. Quite a few of us are ambitious. But are we ambitious for worldly gain, or for spiritual gain? It is a question Jesus asked all too often.

In any case, Jesus clearly delighted in this world, but He lived for the spiritual realities He saw as very real beyond this physical world. And He kept saying things that sounded strange to most people in His time: *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”* *“Do not fear him who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”* And on and on. In the fascinating study of the choices and decisions that confronted Jesus, it is astounding to us still today that He invariably chose according to spiritual realities rather than physical realities.

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As implied last Sunday, Paul picked up this perspective from Jesus. Perhaps we have insufficient information, but it does not appear that Paul had this view of life before he met Jesus. Nevertheless, by the time we hear his thoughts as we read his letters, Paul is constantly talking about the duality of our lives: the way of sin and the way of faith; the deeds of the flesh and the deeds of the Spirit; baptism into a new Life and a new WAY.

We pick it up in verse two of our reading from Ephesians today: *“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.”*

I sometimes suspect that because Paul is fairly new to seeing the new dimensions that have opened up for him in baptism – in the unexpected grace of the Damascus Road (in being born anew, as we say) – he is pretty hard on the physical dimensions that he knows he was caught in before his spiritual awakening. And now he can see that others are still caught in the physical realities without seeing much beyond them. The physical realities can be pretty grim, as all of us know. But they are still God’s creation, and so are the beings who inhabit the physical realms. From everything we can pick up, Jesus loved life. He enjoyed good food, good wine, and time with friends and loved ones. Despite all the seriousness of His mission and purpose, Jesus seemed to rejoice in the experiences and encounters He had in this realm. His parables reveal how much He paid attention to nature. His dealings with a wide variety of people in many different circumstances show us how interested He was in people, and how much He understood what they were experiencing and how great was their potential. Some of us see that He was far more humorous than we at first expected. And that He got angrier than we were taught. And that He was far more engaged with the life going on all around Him than most of our impressions of Him would imply.

The dichotomy between the two realms is very real indeed, but Jesus was a full participant in both sides of the spectrum. If we change allegiance from one realm to the other, we tend to think this means we should entirely abandon the physical realm in favor of the spiritual realm. Certainly many groups of Christians have tried to withdraw from “the world” altogether: some of the desert Fathers, and monks and nuns; spiritual orders are impressive indeed, and so are some of the individuals we know about who have been part of them. But I am essentially a

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Protestant, and withdrawal always seems to me like an aberration of our faith. Besides, the two dimensions stay interconnected for as long as we live here. And yes, we must be very clear about where our true allegiance lies. But we must also be clearer and clearer about where and how the Holy Spirit wants us to participate in the life going on all around us – *in both realms*. Now *that* is a very different kind of balancing act. That is what I think we should be talking about with each other far more than we do. How do we honor our allegiance to Jesus and still participate in the life of this world? And however much God in Christ Jesus may love us, they have not been kind enough to yank us out of this world quite yet. That is our true dilemma. We may be born again, but we have not died the second death. Where do we think we are?

“In, but not of, this world.” Caught halfway in between. This is where we need God’s help. Here is where we need guidance and comfort. And we are forever seeking solutions, answers, ways to be right – principles to help us feel good about our choices and our efforts. Here, in a broken world, halfway between heaven and hell, and we expect to be “right” about anything? What does it really mean to be “the church” – God’s faithful people – here and now? That is our challenge. That is the tightwire we are really walking. Do we want to get comfortable; feel good about ourselves; paint in pastel shades; be Pollyanna; have right views? If so, we came to the wrong world. Of course, we could always pretend. Lots of people do. Somebody should start a new religion: The religion of the pretenders. We could pretend the world is the way we wish it were, and that we are the people we ought to be. On second thought, there is no need to create one. So many of the existing religions are already doing it this way.

More and more I have come to believe that abandoning the “ways of the world” is not how we become truly spiritual. Our true desire, and our faithfulness, is for an effort to apply the “Way of the Spirit” to our participation in the world. But that is still a constant question, a constant uncertainty – a constant tension – that we cannot handle apart from the guidance and ever-current dialogue between us and the Holy Spirit. The realm of the physical and the realm of the spiritual are both very real. Between the two, we would have to say that the spiritual realm is more real, more important, and longer lasting. But most of our opportunities to express the values and purposes of the spiritual realities are in fact embodied in the physical realities. At least for as long as we live here, in this world.

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So even in a broken realm: Light is a long way from darkness. Love is a long way from indifference. Some of the people we encounter who do not seem very aware of the spiritual dimensions do some very wonderful things, sometimes showing amazing compassion and generosity and yes, “love.” Conversely, a goodly number of Christians act very negative about life. Do they think they can abhor all life, pleasure, delight, and appreciation in this realm and then suddenly switch to gratitude and love in the realms to come? I suspect that this is a terrible aberration.

Oh, I am not feeling smug at all. I have had a tendency to be far too serious and somber about all the shortcomings of life here, and about all my own foibles and errors and mistakes here. As if serious and somber would in any way help to improve anything? Is it really my plan to wait until the next realm before claiming any real joy or thankfulness for what God has created here and now? To be fair, I was trained – raised – to be very serious and overly conscientious. I suspect that Paul was too. It is one of the natural affinities between us. Only, he did start to see a different reality with greater and greater delight. For him, it was big and amazing and clear: *“By grace you have been saved through faith [i.e., by trust in Jesus, or, in full spectrum, by trust in the love of God revealed in and by Jesus], and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not a result of works [and not a result of your seriousness or conscientiousness or trying so hard], so that no one may boast.”*

And in true paraphrase: If we ever do any good works, they will have come through us from God. Not our design. They will come through us when we have relaxed enough to trust the forgiveness and grace of God’s true love – trusted it enough to get out of the way and let it flow because it is real; not because we are trying so hard, think it’s a good idea, or think it will prove that we are good Christians.

It is indeed a balancing act. We live in the midst of two very real realities. And while they are quite different, they are not always the mortal enemies we have so often pictured. Under duress, I think the physical realm will always resort to anger and destruction. Under duress, I think the spiritual realm will always resort to forgiveness, compassion, and mercy. But there are some incredible deeds of love in the physical realm. And much of the spiritual realm as we experience it here is still connected to and corrupted by the physical realities we are so immersed in and used to. Indeed, it does seem like the cruelest and most vicious deeds of all come from those who are in part spiritually awakened, yet still mired in physical responses and worldly methods and approaches.

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Oh and by the way, I almost forgot to mention the truth of our opening imagery:

The truth is, the alligators are extremely soft and very, very friendly. And the stakes are actually an optical illusion. They are part of a very well-designed safety net, and merely help to stabilize the bounce after we fall.

The truth is, failure and disgrace are two very great blessings, and they often help us to truly move from our awareness of the physical realms to a deep and real awareness of the spiritual realms.

Yes, of course – you already knew this. But I suspect we cannot remind each other too often.