

Sermon: "Unraveling The Double Bind "  
(Based upon "Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance  
Of A Religious Revolutionary by Marcus Borg)

By Rev. Peter E. Bauer

Recently, a book entitled "Lonely Planet Sign Spotting No. 2: The World's Most Absurd Signs" was published. The book chronicles several signs which were photographed that give a double message or simply make no sense.

The popularity of sign spotting apparently has caught on and there was even an on line contest for the most interesting signs. Prizes ranged from fifty dollars to a round-the world trip ticket.

The photo of the sign that won last year's round-the-world ticket was as follows: On the walk way of the Golden Gate Bridge spanning the opening of San Francisco Bay was a prominent blue sign that read "Crisis Counseling- There is hope-Make the call." Underneath was the warning "Consequences of jumping from the bridge are fatal and tragic." Beneath these signs was a call box containing a phone connected to the crisis center. But opening the call box revealed another sign taped to the phone that read "temporarily out of order. "

The picture taken of these signs really graphically describes the process and phenomena of the double bind. Formulated in the 1950's by, amongst others, Gregory Bateson to create a theory about schizophrenia, double bind theory is about relationships and what happens when important basic relationships are chronically subjected to invalidation through paradoxical communication.

Such invalidation will cause damaged boundaries, its rejection, and often disguised as acceptance. Hence, the picture of the call box beneath the picture of the sign about the crisis counseling center.

Other examples of double binds are the sign which reads "Do not read this sign. It's a paradox- you cannot do what it asks and implies simultaneously. With paradox there is the illusion of choice. For example "be independent "and "do something spontaneous, "you can neither obey nor disobey because what ever you do will be wrong.

In a relationship where an individual is dependent on another or other for physical and emotional survival, the effect of paradoxical communication can be devastating. Picture your spouse or your significant other telling you in a loud voice "I'm just fine! while they are grimacing their face and grinding their teeth.

Some double binds are therapeutic and some are not. Paradox and double binds abound in life. Double binds are also present when we consider religion and faith and those things that we consider to be of ultimate concern. This deep sense of an indifferent universe and cosmic loneliness has been one of the central themes of art, music, movies and literature over the centuries, including fiction and poetry as well as philosophical and theological works.

With stark clarity and humorous hyperbole, a scene from Woody Allen's movie *Manhattan* expresses it. The main character (Allen himself) is trying to pick up a young woman who is staring at a modern abstract painting in an art gallery. He starts a conversation: "Nice painting." Without taking her eyes away from it, she says:

"It restates the negativeness of the universe; the hideous, lonely, emptiness of existence, the nothingness; the predicament of man forced to live in a barren, godless eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation forming a useless black straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos."

Allen's character then replies "Want to see a movie tonight?" She replies, "I'm planning to kill myself." He responds, "How about tomorrow night?"

What can be pathological is staying trapped and entangled in futile attempts to unravel them from within. Individual emergence could mean unraveling entrapment through the identification of double binds and "mixed messages", in short re-learning the leveling patterns of communication and there is an irony that this can be done through therapy using double binds. One way to conceptualize the difference between what have been called therapeutic binds and pathogenic binds is that in the former, at least one participant recognizes what is happening.

This appears to have been the case when Jesus was confronted by the Sadducees. We read in Matthew's Gospel that the Sadducees had inquired the following of Jesus:

When a man dies and he is childless and his brother marries the widow in order to have children for him. If there are seven brothers and they all marry the same woman. When the woman dies, in the resurrection whose wife will she be of the seven?

It sounds like a math problem, doesn't it? What a loaded question! One that is fraught with first century Hellenistic Judaism patriarchy. The Sadducees who were concerned about maintaining morality and order as they understood it for the first century was representative of being in a pathogenic bind. They were hoping to perhaps force Jesus to renounce Jewish law and interpretation and in so doing diminish and dismiss the significance of Jesus' message.

Here Jesus responds, "You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God." He goes on to say at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like angels in heaven. "Jesus does appear to exercise the therapeutic bind maintaining an individuated response and advocating a third way, not a perspective that would not deny Jewish faithfulness nor support extreme legalism.

In his book "Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary," Marcus Borg makes a major distinction in the understanding of a belief in Jesus.

Marcus Borg argues that in the last four hundred years "belief "has undergone a radical change of meaning, so that its modern meaning is very different from its pre-modern Christian meanings.

For some modern Christians, believing means believing a set of claims, a set of statements: believing that God exists, that the Bible is the Word of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died for our sins, that he rose from the dead, that he is the only way of salvation, that he will come again and so forth. This is believing as defined by affirming a set of beliefs to be true.

But prior to about the year 1600 the verb “believe” had a very different meaning within Christianity as well as in popular usage. It did not mean believing statements to be true; the object of the verb “believe” was always a person, not a statement. This is the difference between believing that and believing in. To believe in a person is quite different from believing that a set of statements about the person are true. In pre-modern English, believing meant believing in and thus a relationship of trust, loyalty and love. Most simply believe meant to believe.

Marcus Borg argues that the Christian Gospels should be read with the historical-critical paradigm. Here he argues that the Gospels are the result of a historical process. Written in the last third of the first century, they tell us what Jesus had become in the lives of the communities in which the traditions reported in them developed.

As such the Gospels combine memory and testimony. Some of what they report is the fuller understanding that had developed in the decades between his death and the writing of the Gospels.

The Gospels also combine memory and metaphor, historical memory with metaphorical narrative. There is a crucial distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. The former is Jesus before his death; the later is what Jesus became after his death. There are important differences between the two.

In the movie “Lions for Lambs,” a powerful tale unfolds about three people, actually five people including the two American soldiers who end up getting killed fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, who are caught up in terms of their personal and corporate reactions to the current war on terrorism. It is the character Janine Roth portrayed by Meryl Streep who struggles with unraveling the double bind of the war and how journalists have covered the war. Janine Roth realizes that she is partially responsible for the meteor rise of the Neo-Con Senator Jasper Irving portrayed by Tom Cruise.

Janine also struggles with her opposition to the new war strategy proposed by Jasper Irving. She states at one point to her television news editor “Rome is burning and the people are doing nothing while they fiddle. “She then adds regarding why journalism didn’t challenge the administration more aggressively regarding the war, “We knew it. We had the data, if we had just connected the dots.”

Unraveling the double bind can allow one to move and to grow from being the pre-undifferentiated, the sleep self to the post differentiated awake and alive self. This process and this journey are not without pain and not without sacrifice. As Dr. Stephen Malley, the professor portrayed by Robert Redford says, “Adulthood starts before you know it. No life guard is watching. You’re on your own, it’s your decisions.”

That's the beauty of individuation and differentiation of self. You are responsible for you and you are responsible for your own decisions, both individually and corporately. This can be exhilarating and frightening and sometimes it can be comically ironic.

Recently when former Vice-President Al Gore was honored at the White House along with the other American Nobel Laureates for their work on global warming, according to the New York Times, he had a challenge leaving the White House.

Al Gore and his wife Tipper walked out along Pennsylvania Avenue up to 17<sup>TH</sup> Street, apparently to their car. The media followed the Gores for several minutes. When a Veteran reporter asked Gore if he missed all of the attention, he adeptly turned the question around, "When you leave this beat," he said, "I'm gonna ask you."

May we be able to unravel all of our double binds today, tomorrow and forever more.

Shalom, Amen, Salaam, Blessed Be