

The Power of AND

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I don't know about you, but I've been trying to catch snippets of both the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention the past two weeks. For me, it's fascinating to see our political process in action and it'll be interesting to see how things play out in this election.

Ohio is such a battleground state that my parents can't wait until November. I called them the other day and they complained that they've had numerous phone calls from both sides asking about what issues are most important to them and who they'd be voting for. They see political ads daily and Ohio has been hit hard on the campaign trail by both sides. But we also talked about how dualistic the questions were, it seemed like there was no room for any moderate position. It was you're either on this side or that side of the issue, you either like this candidate or that candidate for president, you're either with us or you're against us.

Now these were five minute telephone polls—they're set up to be precise, decisive, and to the point. No rambling about your reservations on either candidate or how you have mixed thoughts and feelings about certain issues. No, you are either a supporter of Governor Mitt Romney or President Barack Obama. No questions asked. End of story.

I understand this mindset, and I think we're programmed to think this way in the West. We have a very dualistic way of thinking and being in our world. Think about it, you are either a Democrat or a Republican, conservative or liberal if you prefer, male or female, old or young, short or tall, educated or uneducated, gay or straight, rich or poor, etc. There used to be a website popular when I was in college called hot or not.com. People would submit a photo of themselves and you would with one click of your mouse judge their attractiveness and rate them as hot or not. Sorry if that seems too black and white, but that's just the way it is.

Of course, we can say, but hey I'm an Independent or I'm average height or I'm in the middle class or I'm middle aged or I'm sort-of attractive when I make an effort and do my hair in the morning. But too many times, we have an either/or mentality.

Suffice it to say, this can be really problematic. Because sometimes we have to compromise and meet one another in the middle or we'll never get anything done. These days compromise seems to be viewed as weakness, you're too wishy washy. You're not tough enough; you need to stick to your guns and draw your line in the sand and don't move from that position no matter what.

I was struck by Republican Senator Olympia Snowe from Maine announcing her retirement earlier this year because she said, "what motivates me is producing results for those who have entrusted me to be their voice and their champion . . . I do find it frustrating, however, that an atmosphere of polarization and 'my way or the highway' ideologies has become pervasive in campaigns and in our governing institutions."^[1] The gridlock and either/or thinking has become so detrimental in this country that we're not accomplishing much these days. And we're apparently losing some Moderates in our government like Olympia Snowe in the process because how can you work in this kind of an atmosphere where you're either with us or against us about everything? Moreover, you are sometimes viewed as weak or not decisive enough if you intentionally seek to compromise.

In fact, today's scripture from the Letter of James highlights some of the class divisions present in the early Christian community that were threatening to tear the whole thing apart. It was an us versus them moment in the Church. This should be one of those passages that makes us uncomfortable and makes us shift around in our seats, it's confrontational. "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"[2] The implication is, well if you believe in Jesus, you certainly aren't acting like it!

It reminds me of my childhood actually. Maureen and I went through this phase that all we did was fight—we just couldn't tolerate each other, let alone be nice to one another. We would be on our best behavior during Sunday School and sitting in church. But as soon as we'd get to the car, we would be fighting again. My dad's famous line during this phase in our lives, and he would literally yell at us in the car after church when we began our bickering again, was, "Hey, you just got out of church. Act like Christians! Act like Christians!"

Well, how are Christians supposed to act you may wonder? The Epistle of James explains this very thing. We're supposed to help our brothers and sisters, that's pretty vital when you claim to be a Christian. James flat out says that it's not enough to tell a starving, naked person—"Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill" and yet not help them to get food and clothes. He says, "What is the good of that?"[3] These empty words are just that, meaningless, easy, passive, and not good enough if you're trying to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The letter of James is most famous for extolling the early community to do good works in addition to having faith in Christ. The famous line is, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."[4]

Martin Luther, who was all about justification by faith alone, hated this book so much that he almost didn't include it in his German translation of the New Testament. He relented and did include the Epistle of James, but he made the distinction in his German translation between what he deemed as chief books and less important books of the Bible. James, Hebrews, and Revelation were, in his view, less important books.[5]

The irony of all of this and getting back to my point of dualistic thinking, is that this letter is all about Christian ethics, it's about how we're supposed to be in community with one another and how we're supposed to treat our brothers and our sisters. And yet it became and maybe still is, one of the most divisive books in Christian history. It became the proof text Catholics used against Protestants to say that the doctrine of justification by faith alone has some flaws, to put it nicely.

But here's the thing.—this shouldn't be an either/or scenario like we are so prone to thinking and labeling it these days. And apparently we were doing this even back during the Protestant Reformation and back in the early Christian Church too. That line, that singular line, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" means that you have to have faith and works.

In the Protestant mind, out of your deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ, you will do good works. It's inevitable, how can you not help your brothers and sisters when you believe the commandments that you should love God and your neighbors as yourself? And if you say you believe in these essential teachings of Jesus, God-with-us, and those beliefs have absolutely no effect on the way you live, we should be asking how deep and abiding your faith is in the first place.

So what does this all point to? Quite simply, the power of the word AND. Whether disagreements and conflicts happened in the First Century, the Sixteenth Century, or our Twenty-First Century, one of the most radical and powerful words in our vocabulary is the word AND. Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, emphasizes as he calls it, "the shining word 'and'" is his book *The Naked Now*.

Rohr says, "'And' teaches us to say yes. 'And' allows us to be both-and. 'And' keeps us from either-or. 'And' keeps us from dualistic thinking. 'And' keeps us inclusive and compassionate toward everything. 'And' is the way of mercy. 'And' does not trust justice if it is not also love." [6]

So you see, we need Democrats and Republicans and Independents and the Green Party and other third parties for our political system to succeed. We need Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox Christians to fully express the Christian faith. We need Christians and Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and Sikhs and every other world religion to seek truth and the Divine.

We need faith and works in order to be Christians in our world, now more than ever. And as we begin this new church year together, in our blessed diversity of thought, belief, and actions, I pray that we feel the Holy Spirit of justice and love at work among us. And let us live into the words of my father, "Act like Christians!" May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Amy Walter, "Maine Republican Senator Olympia Snowe to Retire," February 28, 2012 <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/02/maine-sen-olympia-snowe-to-retire/>

[2] James 2:1.

[3] James 2:15-16.

[4] James 2:17.

[5] Chapter from Philip Schaff's History of the Christian Church, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/luther02.html>

[6] Richard Rohr, The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See, 180-181.