

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on October 23, 2022.

LIVING IN PARADOX AND MYSTERY

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. II Peter 2:1

During the first seven hundred years of Christian History, there were several Ecumenical Councils. These were meetings in which all the Bishops of the Christian world were invited to gather to restore peace and reach an orthodox consensus on some point of faith. They were not regularly scheduled events. They were called in reaction to what appeared to be false teaching or heresy. The councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon were called to refute what seemed to be false teachings about the person and mission of Jesus. These false ideas about Jesus were thought to be heresy.

The word heresy is not one we feel comfortable using. When I hear this word the image from a Monty Python skit keeps coming to mind. There are clerics clothed in red saying, "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition." Heresy reminds us of negative aspects of Christian history with burnings at the stake and excommunications. Heresy would seem to have no part in the Good News of Jesus' love.

But then we come to our text for this morning. We read **but false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.** The Greek word that is translated in the New Revised Standard Bible as destructive opinions is heresy. Peter is warning against teachers coming and leading people away from the truth of the Gospel through their own opinions.

This morning I would like us to focus on the experience of Irenaeus who was one of the Christian leaders who dealt with the first great heresy that threatened the church.

Irenaeus was born around 115 AD. In what is now Turkey. Unlike most early Christian leaders, Irenaeus was raised in a Christian family. He went to Rome to study and became a teacher. He made his way to Lyon in France as a helper to the Bishop. The leaders of the church in Lyon sent him to Rome on a mission. While he was away persecution came upon the church in Lyon. In the persecution the Bishop was killed, so on his return Irenaeus became the Bishop of Lyon. He died in 202AD.

Irenaeus' principle work is called ***Against Heresies***. This work is directed primarily against what is called Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a philosophical religious movement that grew up in the ancient world. For a long time, the sources of information about Gnosticism came from the writings of its adversaries. This situation changed dramatically with the discovery, in 1945 in Nag Hammadi in Egypt, of a collection of twelve codices written in the fourth century containing Gnostic works in a Coptic translation. Since 1945 there has been a small industry in understanding and for some writers promoting a Gnostic worldview.

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge. Followers of this movement called themselves Gnostics meaning those capable of knowledge. In general, the Gnostics used Christian language but denied some core doctrines of the Church.

They denied the goodness of the created order. Many saw matter as evil.

They rejected the idea of the full incarnation of Christ. Some went so far to say Jesus only appeared to be human.

They did not rely on Scripture as the source of truth, but rather secret wisdom passed on by Jesus' disciples to special followers.

Many denied the redemptive power of Jesus' death on the cross.

Irenaeus was concerned that this highly intellectual and elitist movement would lead people away from being able to follow Christ. He knew that seemingly new ideas are attractive. He wrote: **“Error, indeed is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced more true than truth itself.”**

In his writings Irenaeus appeals to Scripture, tradition and reason to refute the argument of the Gnostics. His goal was to preserve the Good News that in Jesus' death and resurrection we have been given the gifts of forgiveness, love and eternal life.

What do we learn today from Irenaeus' experience in wrestling with heresy?

First, we need to reject all appeals to elitism in religion. One of the aspects that made Gnosticism attractive was its promise of making you a part of an elite community who had secret knowledge.

There has been a revival of this thinking in some Christian circles. One sees this portrayed rather most crassly in books such as the *Da Vinci Code*. There are writers who promise to give you the inside scoop – the secret truth about reality. This will make you part of the inner-circle. They manipulate people by their vanity, our need to feel important. Heresy feeds on this base human need.

They also tended to teach that everything must have a concrete answer that we can understand through reason. Orthodox Christianity believes in the concept of mystery because human beings cannot fully grasp God. As Evagrius of Pontus reminds us **God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could be grasped, he would not be God.** This is true because we human beings are part of creation and God is outside creation. As creatures you and I can only think in terms that are analogous with that which is part of creation. We can only point to the reality of God, we cannot fully grasp God. God has revealed himself to us in Jesus and the Scriptures, but Paul still tells us we only see in a mirror dimly. When we speak of the reality of mystery we are showing humility. We are acknowledging the limits of our knowledge. There is no special knowledge for the elite.

Secondly, heresy often limits and rejects the authority of Scripture and Tradition. The Gnostics taught that Scripture was not enough. One needed the secret knowledge that they possessed. We should always be on alert when a book or a preacher or a teacher proclaims they have the key to understanding the truth or that they have the correct way to read the Bible or they know how history might unfold.

Thirdly we learn that most heresies result from an overemphasis on one aspect of truth rather from complete falsehood. The Gnostics knew that God is spirit and that is true. But they so focused on the spiritual that matter became evil. We know that so much of Christianity and reality is not fully knowable. So much of our faith requires balance, humility and the acceptance of paradox.

The Doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God is three in one. Some Heresies developed when groups emphasized the oneness of God to such an extent that the persons of the Trinity were obliterated. Other Heresies so focused on the three-ness that the unity of God was excluded.

We know that Jesus was both human and divine. Yet some heresies have so focused on Jesus' divinity that they denied there was even a human Jesus. Other groups have so emphasized Jesus' humanity that he ceases to be a Savior.

So very often heresy develops from a need for certainty,
A denial of paradox
And a rejection of mystery.

Fourthly we can learn that the function of doctrine and creeds are to set boundaries within which we can discover truth.

I believe that most people assume that creeds and doctrines were created in an attempt to set out a positive concrete set of beliefs that correspond exactly to reality. But I do not believe that this is historically true.

Irenaeus wrote in response to a group of people teaching things about the faith that he knew were not true. He wrote to say the truth can be found on this path not that one described by the Gnostics.

Another heresy developed a couple of hundred years later, when Arius, a deacon in the Church in Alexandria, said that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. He was denying that the Son was really God. The argument that ensued led to a formulation that says God is both three persons and God is one. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery and a paradox.

Years later a monk named Nestorius denied that Mary was Theotokas which means God-bearing. The turmoil and arguments this generated led to the Council of Chalcedon that proclaimed that Jesus was one person, but both fully human and fully divine. Again, a paradox and mystery.

It is interesting that we do not have one clear doctrine on the atonement. The atonement means that Jesus' death and resurrection has made us one with God. There are many theological theories on how Jesus' grace is made available. But the Church never chose one as the truth. This may well be because no major figure ever said the cross does not matter.

I know this can seem difficult to grasp, so let me try to be clear, the purpose of much of creeds and doctrine is not to say this is the complete truth, but rather to set markers which say the truth can be discovered within the boundary markers not outside. The Orthodox Bishop Ware talks of this process in these words:

Secondly and more important, the councils defined once and for all the Church's teaching upon the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith – the Trinity and the Incarnation. All Christians agree in regarding these things as 'mysteries' which lie beyond human understanding and language. The bishops, when they drew up definitions at the councils, did not imagine that they had explained the mystery; they merely sought to exclude certain false ways of speaking and thinking about it. To prevent people from deviating into error and heresy, they drew a fence around the mystery; that was all.

I believe that in many ways creeds and doctrines are to function as a treasure map. If we follow them to a specific area, they tell us where to dig for the treasure which is the truth of the love of God.

Remember Christianity is not merely an intellectual exercise – it is a way of life. The truth is not so much to be understood as lived. The truth is to shape us into goodness. It is to form us into the person God is calling us to be.

This is clear in my favorite quote from Irenaeus of Lyons. He wrote: **“The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”**

We begin to be fully alive when –

We resist the siren songs of elitism and private knowledge
And with open hearts and minds accept the paradox
And mystery which is God.

If we follow the map of Scripture
and dig within the boundaries given by doctrine
we will discover a great treasure.

That treasure is the grace, acceptance and love of Jesus.

And that grace can make us fully alive as we live into mystery and Paradox.