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Galatians 5: 1, 13 – 25  
Dualistic and Holistic

Who does not know the story of Cinderella and the wicked stepmother, the sleeping beauty and the wicked witch, Rapunzel and the enchantress, and many others like them that tell of the relationship of good and evil, the innocent and the guilty, the harmless and the malicious in simplistic yet somehow profound ways. Even the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent tell of the struggle between good and evil, so does the story Jesus' death and resurrection. This dualistic theme of the struggle between good and evil, light and dark, order and chaos has been part of mythical stories, tales, legends as well as philosophies and religions. Even though ancient pagan religions were not generally considered dualistic, as they were polytheistic including all kinds of gods and goddesses with a vast variety of functions and roles, and multiplicity of principles; they often contained implicit dualism between gods who were hostile and destructive and those who were life giving and regenerative.

It is fascinating however, that when one looks into the seemingly dualistic words *devil* and *divinity*, one finds that the two words grew from the same root, the Indo-European *devi* meaning goddess and *deva* meaning god, which is *daeva*, devil, in Persian. Old English *divell* can be traced to the Roman derivative *divus*, *divi*, gods. The word *demon* as well from Latin *dæmon* in its original form referred to spirit, not bad spirit, just spirit. So it seems from the beginning gods and devils were confused, perhaps because the good gods sometimes chose to do evil, and the evil ones chose to do good when pleased. The distinctions between spirits were never clear. The lines were blurred. There was only one spirit-world and it encompassed all that was beyond the grasp of human reason and logic.

Zoroastrianism was one of the first dualistic religions that sprung in ancient Persia which believed in two supreme opposing powers or gods, good and evil, two principles that existed from eternity. Personified as deities, they worked in polar opposition to each other. They were in constant battle.

In today's world, most cultures and religions hold a generally dualistic worldview in differing degrees. In the west, I believe, that our worldview is so entrenched in Dualism that we have lost awareness that there could really be a different way of looking at the world. Influenced by Greco Roman dualistic mindset, the west especially embraces and teaches dualism as if it is the only possible perspective, the only way to live. I am constantly fascinated by the arguments or issues discussed from only two opposing, polarized, "for or against" perspectives, as if the two cover it all.

In today's reading the Apostle Paul introduces us to the works of the flesh and the works of the spirit in completely dualistic form. Paul an educated man in Hellenistic, Greco-Roman thought often comes across extremely dualistic as he portrays flesh and spirit, body and mind, the physical and the spiritual in completely contradictory, conflicting, opposing ways. Spirit and flesh are in constant battle. Spirit is good. Flesh is bad. They always struggle because they cannot find a way to coexist or live together in peace. They cannot integrate or reconcile they are simply too different, too unlike. While we may experience this kind of struggle, compartmentalization, division between body and soul, heart and mind; and while we recognize that when our mind is saying something and our heart is saying something else, we get frustrated... we realize that ultimately when the two meet we find peace. When all parts of our being, mind, body, spirit connect we discover peace of heart and mind and integrity.

Dualism is a perspective in which everything is seen as split into opposing, polarized extremes. Accordingly the perspective is also one of linear thinking, where there is no place for the two ends to meet. This kind of mindset is dangerous for many reasons and it is not a particularly healthy, integrated or holistic perspective. Yet many find comfort in it because they say, nature itself contains many dualistic elements, so we humans may be wired that way. Yet nature and the universe have triune elements as well. While there is day and night, there is also dawn and dusk and in-between. While there is dark and light, there are also shadows of gray and silver. While we are body and mind, we are also body, mind and spirit and so on.

Another argument is that if we don't have good and evil, dualistic clarity and categorization the most fundamental tenets of morality would be rejected. A deed, an idea, a word is either good or evil. It can't be both. And, surely it cannot be something else entirely. That if one begins to question good and evil one approaches the "slippery slope" of moral and ethical anarchy.

Yet this dualistic "either or" approach to things is unhelpful. It provides the illusion of control, a false sense of security, and allows mindless and simplistic choices between only two alternatives. While most of life's issues are complex and multilayered, as are humans, dualism turns life and people into very simple, definable, conclusive objects. It brands issues as good or bad, white or black, right and wrong. It categorizes everything into two very simple terms, creating absolutes. It is interesting to note here that in no other languages I speak do the words right and wrong connote such absoluteness as they do in English.

Be that as it may, dualism divides and separates, excludes and leaves out. It labels and categorizes, constricts our thinking, leaves no room for in-betweens, maybes, different possibilities or alternatives. It allows no variation and enforces conformity by emphasizing that everything needs to be on one side or the other. It is reactive, and thus fear-based. It creates enemies, simplifies relationships, and establishes boundaries that must be defended and protected, creating defensiveness and distrust. It creates monopolies as well as competition and antagonism. And issues can only be solved by one side winning and the other losing. Who wants to live in such a world?

And, a dualistic perspective does not make sense for if we are honest we acknowledge that most of our experiences are somewhere between two extremes. In daily living the line between light and dark, right and wrong, self and other are constantly negotiated, reconfigured and redefined. People are not good or bad, friendly or antagonistic, kind or cruel. People are both good and bad, friendly and antagonistic, kind and cruel, and much more. Either/or thinking makes no sense in a world of quantum physics and living systems which we seem to be discovering. We know by experience that seldom life's issues fall into the rigid categories of *this or that*. Life is more *both/and* than *either/or*, the acknowledgement of which challenges us to imagine new possibilities and find commonalities.

According to theologian Jim Nelson dualism "*is the radical breaking apart of two elements that essentially belong together.*" As the word *devil* and *divine* share the same root so do seemingly "*irreconcilable opposites are indivisibly one because they can only exist together.*" What appears *either/or* is essentially *both/and*. Existence is an essential oneness appearing as duality. (Freke and Gandy.)

Matthew Fox's words also ring true: "*If one were to devise a way in which to best kill creativity; one would be hard put to invent anything more surely effective than to instruct persons in dualistic thinking, dualistic feeling and dualistic living. The problem with this is that it kills God, it kills the spirit, it kills the human person who cannot live without creativity.*"

He is right. Not only is creativity a human characteristic, an imaginative, alternative way, opening us to all kinds of possibilities, God as well looks small and definable when understood in dualistic terms. In dualistic terms God has to be defined as all good or as all bad, which is problematic and senseless. In traditional Christianity God is all good, the source of all goodness, but God and evil are never equal. Biblically, God is always more powerful than evil, which is one of the messages of our scriptural story as demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus when God raises Jesus and defeats death; in the story of exodus when God saves the people from slavery and oppression; in the stories of Jesus when God heals and liberates... In the Bible and in our faith God is always more powerful than evil. The personification of evil, known as Satan or the Devil could do nothing without God's permission, the personification of good. For, there is no such thing as absolute evil. The only absolute is Good. Evil exists relative to absolute Good.

The ancients understood dualisms not as dichotomy but as complimentary. They could see the wholeness of male and female, the completeness of light and dark, the unity of black and white. As numbers symbolized concepts, number *two* meant alternation, diversity, dependence as well as otherness, especially in relation to number *one* which was ultimate, primordial unity. Yet number *two* did not represent wholeness or completeness. That was the characteristic of number *three*. So it is no coincidence that our traditional Christian God is Triune, trinity, and whole.

Today as in the past mystical people remind us that God is not only fullness and light, God is also emptiness and darkness, and more. As mystics go deeper into the self they discover the vast emptiness and darkness that envelops them, in which they lose the self as well as find it. They find an eternal, endless non-being, blankness, as well as an eternal, endless being-ness and fullness. God is everything and God is nothing, which is a way of saying God IS – God is all, in all, ultimate, absolute isness. And that which is all, and all encompassing cannot have opposites. Marianne Williamson states – *an all encompassing reality cannot have opposites*. If God is the all encompassing reality, all encompassing oneness and there is nothing outside of that oneness, then God is Good, God is Love, God is ultimate being, the absolute “is” that cannot have dualisms, dichotomies, opposites. God is all about wholeness and completeness.

An alternative to dualistic thought is holistic and dialogic worldview where opposites are not seen as polarized but complimentary, not divided but connected, not separated but united, as part of the same. There is no antagonism but an understanding over a continuum over a circle, appreciating more than just two perspectives. Dialogic thinking creates opportunities for dialogue allowing us to be who we are, and not just fit into two defined categories. It evokes creativity and reciprocity. It aims toward wholeness and health, a win-win situation for all instead of the win-lose battle of dualism. It sees the world a quantum, a system, a circle, as one big whole, interconnected interdependent, interrelating, inclusive and integrated. The essence of human goodness and health is the urge to resolve duality into unity, to connect and integrate. Often we experience this as Love. The deepest desire of each human heart is to connect, to integrate, to heal and to be loved to wholeness. A dualistic worldview does not allow that. Holistic and dialogic worldview does. Walking that journey takes us toward the oneness, wholeness, goodness, and love whom we call the Divine.

#### Resources used:

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*The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* by Barbara Walker, Harper San Francisco, 1983

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Article: Beyond Dualism, by Tom Heurman, Ph.D. with Diane Olson, Ph.D.

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