

“A Koan from God,” Rev. Jeff Johnson

Luke 10: 25-38

After I retired seven (!) years ago, I found myself going through some of my papers and inspirational materials. I came across this gem from Lao Tzu, the Sage who came out of the Daoist philosophical tradition, connected to Buddhism. I had always found him to be a source of awakening for me, but this time he really gave me a jolt (sort of a wake-up call with more voltage): “He who speaks does not know...He who knows does not speak.” Yes, I had heard this many times before, but this time I was in a more reflective mood, looking back over the nearly 40 years I had spent in parish ministry. I was vulnerable. In those many years I had spoken VERY often—weekly sermons, weddings and funerals, prayers and conversations at meetings, and in people’s homes and next to their hospital beds. It could be said that I was largely paid to talk! And, of course, those of you who know me well will have no trouble recalling how after all of that official talking was done, I still had some hot air left to share with anyone who would listen.... : “He who speaks does not know....hmmm”. Had most of those words been empty?

After some further reflection on Lao Tzu, I came to the conclusion that he was offering me a KOAN—it’s a word puzzle that is essentially impossible to solve with logic. I don’t really like Koans. But I discovered that I was not alone. Its purpose is not primarily to give insights through wisdom, but instead to roadblock our ego, in the hopes that our efforts will cause it to crack—which is the only way that the Spirit of the Living God can escape. This is *intended* to be a painful and disruptive process, something like giving birth. Our hungry egos don’t like being out foxed. When we get our way or win our point, we so often think that God has spoken TO me and Through me!” The parable of the Good Samaritan is a great example. Who doesn’t know this story? We teach it to our children as the foundation of personal morality. The Samaritan does the caring thing, stopping, helping, risking, and coming back to cover the costs. Such compassion is noteworthy. Right?

But we tend to vilify the two who pass by ignoring the wounded man. But did you know that the Jewish Priest was not permitted to touch a dead body—it would make him temporarily impure and unable to perform his religious duties. Same for the Levite—he helped with worship in the Temple, and would also have been excluded from his sacred duties. The well-educated Jews of Jesus day would have caught all of this immediately. This parable was written FOR and delivered TO Jewish people 2,000 years ago, trying to crack them open so that the sacred light, always with us, could be received and shared. Yes, it certainly has messages we can grasp today, but this isn’t just a feel good story about somebody else’s social blindness....it’s about OUR OWN. We love it when we can see our way clear to point the finger at the obvious villain—and then Jesus holds up the mirror and dares us to take a good look. This story—the work of a genius. Jesus touches the match to the fuse, and it was intended to explode in the hearts of his listeners. (We can hear the grumblers: “He has the audacity to make the unforgivable Samaritan the hero, and in the process he insults an honorable Priest and a Levite. These are fighting words!!”) So Jesus has really loaded the deck with all of these details. His listeners would have been furious which it seems clear, was his intention.

I have been following some of the debate that has been happening in the town and this church concerning the issues surrounding race. And I’ve heard that there have been some tensions, and

disagreements. *Praise God*. Conflict is always difficult— Easy and convenient answers abound with every conflict, but they *never* bring ultimate healing. We might feel a little better for a little while, but those solutions don't have much staying power.

William Sloane Coffin: "We cannot be of the same mind, but we must be of the same heart." This isn't as impenetrable as most Koans. As much as we want resolutions where everybody is happy, it almost never happens that way. In negotiations between nations, or in cities and towns, and families and marriages we take it as a pretty good sign if BOTH sides are unhappy with the final resolution.

John Lewis—whose words have become more familiar to us of late: "Do not get lost in a sea of despair," Lewis tweeted almost exactly a year before his death. "Do not become bitter or hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way." We know he meant it because he laid his body, his mind and his very soul on the line.

Daniel Kahneman, expert in the areas of economics and decision theory, champions the idea of "adversarial collaboration"—*When studying something, work with people you disagree with*. Koans and Parables, it seems, were designed for just this kind of outcome:

Yes, celebrate your freedom as you investigate the freedom of so many others. You are to be commended for having tackled one of the most sticky, bloody, shame-filled, and intractable issues that our country and our world has ever faced. But don't delude yourselves into thinking that you can think, debate or argue your way to some kind of self-proclaimed intellectual victory. It is Love that must rule the day—not the sweet and comfortable variety, but the good and necessary "trouble" lifted up by John Lewis. Do we dare call it love? Perhaps God has given us another Koan to wrestle with together....