

Delicious Ambiguity

A Message by James R. Newby

Test: Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

I believe it was John Chancellor, the late NBC Newscaster, who said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.” He said this just after he had retired, and just after he had learned that he had a deadly form of cancer. He was learning, what many of us know, that life is not easy. Plans get thwarted. Hopes get dashed, and trust betrayed. Loved ones die too soon, and relationships unravel. And yet despite the heartache, the disappointment, the bafflement, most of us want our lives to have at least a *beginning*, a *middle* and an *end*, in that order.

Gilda Radner, of *Saturday Night Live* fame, who died at the age of 42 of ovarian cancer, said as much in her autobiography, which was published shortly before her death. “I wanted to be able to write on the book jacket: ‘Her triumph over cancer,’ or ‘She wins the cancer war.’ I wanted a perfect ending. So, I sat down to write the book with the ending in place before there even was an ending. Now I’ve learned the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle and end.” She continues, “Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change,

taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next...Delicious ambiguity.”

These are poignant words from a gifted entertainer. *Delicious Ambiguity*. Isn't that all that we can really expect in life? It is possible that your life has proceeded along the straight path that you imagined for it, but the odds against all the lines in your poem rhyming are very high. The future is not fixed, and the present is in continuous flux.

Delicious Ambiguity. A couple of weeks ago, I shared a post on Facebook that showed a graph with a straight arrow from the beginning of one's life, with the word's underneath, "How you imagined your life going." Next to it was a similar graph, with an arrow all over the place going in all different directions, with the words underneath saying, "How your life actually turned out."

I know about ambiguity experientially. I wrote a book about it. For years my life had been that of caretaker and problem fixer. The more I was needed to fix things and make them alright again, the more I felt justified in my ministry. Nothing seemed beyond my capability. In my book I compare my life to the person in the circus who spins plates on sticks. Just as I finished adding a new plate, the first one needed another twist of the stick to keep it

spinning. Whether it was my marriage, fatherhood, managing the Trueblood Academy and representing the Earlham School of Religion, there seemed to be no end to the number of plates which I could add to my life. The way in which I could keep everything spinning amazed even the most skeptical. I found purpose in workaholism...And institutions love the workaholic! Life was a straight path. All the lines in my poem were rhyming.

And then my father died of a massive heart attack at the age of 62. My teacher and mentor, with whom I had worked closely for 10 years, moved to a retirement home in Pennsylvania. My Mother was diagnosed with dementia, the forerunner of Alzheimer's Disease, our only daughter left for college, and Elizabeth was becoming increasingly irritated with me...I mean more than she usually is! My life was becoming chaotic and ambiguous. At this point I could not understand it as Delicious Ambiguity, all that I knew and felt was that it hurt, and life was not the straight path it had once been.

As I worked through the new realities of the life that was confronting me, I learned that ambiguity is not *automatically* delicious. There are ways, however, that will help to make it so.

The first way to help make the ambiguities of life delicious is forgiveness. The longer I live the more I am learning about the importance of forgiveness if one

is to be spiritually healthy. If hurts and ills are calculated and never canceled by forgiveness, the sum of the damage that carrying a grudge can cause, will submerge your life. Jesus understood this. In response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many times as seven times? Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" Now, maybe there are persons in this world who take Jesus literally, and are adding up their times of forgiveness until they reach 490. What I believe Jesus was saying, however, is that *forgiveness has no end*. He is saying, if you forgive seventy times seven, forgiveness will become so much a part of your very being, that you will be forgiving all the time! And so, the first way to make the ambiguity in our lives delicious is to practice forgiveness.

A second way in which we can make our ambiguity delicious is by practicing repentance. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, "The gift of *repentance* distinguishes human beings from the animal world," and that "The habit of *repentance* is lost to our whole callous and chaotic age." The Prodigal Son *repented*...In the words of Jesus, "He came to himself." When his repentance was met by his father's compassion, the scene became one of celebration. Having made choices in his life that gave him few options, he garnered enough courage to repent, and he was forgiven.

The way of forgiveness and repentance require courage, and they take practice. Their effectiveness can be greatly enhanced with a third practice...*the practice of gratitude.*

Mark Minear is a Counseling Psychologist, my colleague in the Sacred Chaos seminars we led together, and a very good friend. He is the co-author of a book that we are writing on ministry and leadership. During one of his presentations in the seminars we led, Mark would talk about *gratitude*. It is Mark's second pillar in his trilogy for an abundant life. The other two are *Mindfulness* and *Hope*. Mark said, "The most transformational thing we can do in our lives is to nurture gratitude," and "If we can get gratitude right, then we can get the Gospel right!"

Finally, if we want to make the ambiguity of our lives delicious, we need one another...We need spiritual friendships within a community of faith. Being a part of a community where we are loved and where we can express love, multiplies our options. We don't have to manage our whole story by ourselves. We can share our stories, and we can experience the care and love of those who can relate to our pain.

The earlier quotation from Gilda Radner's autobiography wasn't quite complete. "Delicious Ambiguity" was only the first part of the sentence...It

concludes, “As Joanna said.” Early in Radner’s illness she met Joanna Bull, assistant director of The Wellness Community. This community became Radner’s support and Joanna Bull kept reminding her, “I just want you to know that you are not alone.” Because of this friendship, Gilda Radner knew that her ambiguity could become delicious.

Forgiveness...Repentance...Gratitude and Spiritual Friendship...Four ways to help make the ambiguities of our lives delicious. And there is one more: *We are given the promise that God will never forsake us.* At the end of Chapter 8 in his *Letter to the Church of Rome*, Paul writes: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any of the other ambiguities that life can throw at us, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I wish for all of us a life of delicious ambiguity. May God grant us the imagination to so weave our way through this often-ambiguous life by forgiveness, repentance, gratitude and spiritual friendship, and may we be

given the reassuring truth that through it all, NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.