

Navigating complexity

Text: “Just as you do not know the way of the wind or the mysteries of a woman with child, no more can you know the work of God who is behind it all.” Ecclesiastes 11:5

One day a quantum physics professor was discussing a particularly complicated concept. A pre-med student rudely interrupted to ask, "Why do we have to learn this pointless, very complicated information?"

"To save lives." the professor responded quickly and continued the lecture.

A few minutes later, the same student spoke up again. "So how does quantum physics save lives?" he persisted.

"Well," said the professor, with a smile, "It keeps the ignoramuses like you, out of medical school."

When I was in California, I was privileged to attend the graduation of medical students at The School of Medicine at the University of California at Davis.

There I heard two great speeches given to the graduates: one from a humanities professor, the other from a distinguished medical doctor with long experience in the profession of medicine. Both were about the general complexities of medicine and the specific complexities of the doctor patient relationship.

Illustrating from the classics the humanities professor said:

The thing about life...is that it is very, very complicated. Even if we recognize that it's very complicated, it's always much more complicated than we perceive or estimate. It follows that life's problems, especially the ones in which there is much at stake, are not usually solved by simple... quick solutions.

I want to talk to you today about navigating complexity.

The Biblical story of Joseph is about a very severe famine in the Middle East and Egypt. Famines can be deadly. There is an urgency to act in the wisest way.

The Pharaoh, knowing the need for great leadership in a national emergency, recognized Joseph's outstanding abilities and placed him in charge, with almost absolute power. Joseph imposed a 1/5th tax for 7 years on all of Egypt, appointed supervisors, collected the food for seven years and stored the corn in Pharaoh's name, placing the food in each town in storage and holding it there.

Joseph travelled everywhere organizing the response.

Then the famine came and it affected the then known world. Soon everyone knew that there was corn in Egypt.

In reading this story I thought about all the planning involved and the rollout of the grain to those who were able to purchase it, including his own family who came from Canaan.

Joseph was a brilliant, intelligent leader who knew all about human nature. He had been conceited, his father's favorite, both of which made his brothers furiously jealous to the point of wanting to end his life. He had been falsely accused, and imprisoned. Yet through all these things he had learned to handle the complexity of logistics and human nature, with resilience and determination. He had been prepared by God for this monumental task of leadership.

He also had a deep faith in God and was guided by God through dreams that came true.

As Pharaoh said of him: "Can we find any man like this possessing the Spirit of God?" And so, he said to Joseph "Seeing that God has given you knowledge of all this, there can be no one as wise or intelligent as you. You shall be my chancellor, and all my people shall respect your orders. I will make you governor of the whole land of Egypt."

I think at times there is in all of us a desire that we wish things were simpler and easier to handle- that professional who is shooting himself in the foot, resisting all attempts to help him; or that sister who does not look after herself and whose health is suffering mightily because she lacks discipline and self control about what she eats and drinks. We discover, don't we, in all walks of life, that again and again, the only person we can control is our own self? We want to help others but fail to bring about necessary change. Human nature is complex isn't it? That is why governing us is so hard.

Some of us take on the complexity of the world and its suffering as we listen to the dark news:

So many things in our world are out of our control: population growth, climate change, loss of animal species, viruses jumping into our species from animals. Friends die, old age cripples us and we are full of pain. There are millions unemployed who need jobs. Finding housing can be almost impossible for low-income families.

As the humanities professor said, life is very complicated and its more complicated than we perceive or estimate and the answers to our problems are not usually solved by simple quick solutions.

So, we need to deal with complexity. We have to navigate it successfully if we are to survive and thrive.

Come with me for a moment.

I have always thought that complexity is perhaps the best argument for the existence of God. And God, who we believe is the author of all things, could not produce complexity, if God's own self was not complex enough to be able to create all the complexities of worlds within worlds and universe within universes. The Bible recognizes this complexity.

St. Paul said: “How rich are the depths of God- how deep his wisdom and knowledge and how impossible to penetrate His motives or understand His methods.”

The book of Job says: “God’s works are great, past all reckoning, marvels beyond all counting.”

In other words, God is complex and beyond our wisdom and knowledge.

Jesus also takes up this theme: “Consider the lilies of the field,” he says. “They toil not nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

A lily in the field looks to be simple. It is not. That beauty is incredibly complex. Jesus is using this example of God’s handiwork as an argument for God. Solomon cannot compete with this little flower’s beauty. Why? Because despite the complexity of Solomon’s court and his magnificent robes, the lily’s beauty transcends. Yet that beauty, although apparently simple, is not at all, simple. Billions of tiny cells together make up the lily’s order and beauty.

Similarly, the destiny of a 275 foot redwood tree is all contained in a tiny seed. The biggest of these is General Sherman, a giant sequoia in Sequoia National Park. General Sherman stands 275 feet (84 m) tall, has a 102-foot (31 m) circumference, and weighs an incredible 2.7 million lbs. (1.2 million kilograms). It has to be complicated to locate all that potential in a tiny seed, in fact one of the smallest tree seeds. But the Creator is up to it!

What Jesus is arguing is that just as God looks after the Lily’s and the redwood’s complexity, so God will look after us and whatever is troubling us. That is why we don’t need to worry, says Jesus.

Ever wonder how God could be omnipresent in a far spread out universe?

Heisenberg in 1927, when studying the movement of particles said that it is impossible to be certain about the position of a particle at the same time as knowing its velocity. The more certain we are about the position the less certain we are about the velocity and vice versa.

We know too that even observing the particles changes everything. At the base of quantum physics things are uncertain, of **that** we are certain.

The more we pursue quantum physics, the more complicated it becomes. For instance, Niels Bohr discovered that once subatomic particles such as electrons or photons are in contact, they remain aware of and influenced by each other over any time and any distance. The actions of one will always influence the other no matter how far apart they are separated. They are like Siamese twins that can never be divided. The two subatomic particles continue to talk to each other and whatever happens to one is identical to or the opposite of what happens to the other. This would be true if the particles were at the opposite ends of the universe. They would simultaneously react if something was done to only one of them. What is this about?

For me it's about God.

If God is omnipresent, that's simultaneous, and just because it's complicated to conceive of, it can also be *comforting*. The complexity might very well be okay, good, necessary and part of a finally loving plan.

Part of that plan for us is our own death which is a necessary transition to the next life. There is a great plan for that that we celebrate every Easter.

For whether we like it or not, the planet is better because we have death as a possibility. Consider for just a moment what it would be

like if we didn't die here on earth. It would be chaos. Life would be impossible here very quickly. So it isn't that way. Instead it's complicated!

The second speech at UC Davis came from the experienced physician. In it he described the complexities of the doctor patient relationship. Medicine was not all about reading charts and doing blood tests and following diagnostic formulas and prescribing drugs and recommending surgeries.

He spoke instead of an elderly couple who were facing death. The wife was dying.

One day Jake, the husband, came to the physician with tears running down his cheeks and asked "How am I going to get up in the morning without Margaret after 56 years of waking up at her side?"

The physician sympathized, but gave no answer to the question. Sometime later, the physician stopped in to the hospital room, saw the morning breakfast tray untouched, the lunch tray set beside it, uneaten, and the couple laughing together. Margaret and Jake said to the physician how worried they were about **him** as a physician. They said that he looked so tired...

Then the lecturer paused in his speech and said to the student doctors all gathered around him: "In that room with Margaret and Jake he realized that this wasn't just about physician and patient, this was about human beings caring about each other- **this was about connection.**"

Two days before her death Margaret talked to the physician and said: "**You never know what is going to happen; you'd better be doing what you love, being where you want to be, surrounded by the people you love.**"

Notice in this story two vital things- there were the complexities of dying and the caring beauty of **connection**, and both handled positively by Margaret and Jake.

The Bible suggests we handle complexity and connection by Faith.

Rather than letting the complexity of the world and its suffering drive us away from a belief in God, why not let the complexity drive us *towards* belief in God? Why not entertain the idea that there are more possibilities than we ever dreamed? Instead of limiting God to our beliefs, why not expand our beliefs to include **all** that God is? Why don't we let go of the lesser to accept the greater?

Consider as Jesus suggested, **if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"**

I believe that complexity in Life is navigated successfully when we learn to love God and care for each other.

Now to the verse with which we began: "Just as you do not know the way of the wind or the mysteries of a woman with child, no more can you know the work of God who is behind it all."

A proper understanding of Complexity can lead us to experience AWE.

The nurse approached the man smiling. The labour is going great," she said. "Wouldn't you like to come in?"

"Oh no." The man shook his head.

The nurse returned to the woman in labour. As the birth neared, the nurse went back to the man who was now frantically pacing the hall. "She's doing so well," she assured him. "Wouldn't you like to at least come in and see her?"

The man hesitated slightly, then shook his head again. "No, no, I couldn't do that." He jingled the car keys in his palm and went back to pacing down the hall.

The nurse returned to the mother. As the baby's head began to exit the birth canal, the nurse raced back into the hall, grabbed the man by the elbow and dragged him to the bedside saying ' You've got to see this!'

At that moment, the baby boy was born, and placed on the tummy of his mother whose radiant smile shone through her tears.

The man began to cry openly. Turning to the nurse he sobbed, "You were right! **This is the greatest moment in my life!**"

By now the nurse was also in tears. She put her arm around him and said:

" No one should miss the birth of their son!"

The man looked surprised and said: "This isn't my son. This isn't my wife. I have never seen her before. I was just waiting to bring the car keys to my buddy who is across the hall!"

"Just as you cannot know the mysteries of a woman with child, no more can you know the awesome work of the God who is behind it all."

Amen.