I want to begin by noting, despite the title of this message, *Moral Bipolarity*, I am not discussing the troubling psychological condition known as Bipolar Disorder, formally called Manic Depressive Psychosis. Farther back it was also called “dual form insanity” and “circular insanity.” Today psychologists understand that it’s possible to experience extreme shifts in mood without being psychotic, so the condition is now broken into *Bipolar Disorder I* and *II* to help distinguish between extreme shifts in mood that can be accompanied by psychosis and those that aren’t.

The word “bipolar,” however, existed long before 1980 when the American Psychiatric Association first included it in its Diagnostic Statistical Manuel, and there is nothing innately disorderly about it. If you stop to think about it, in fact, bipolar thinking is a means, perhaps the only means, by which humans can consciously overlay a sense of order in the world. In becoming conscious, that is, we must first learn to differentiate ourselves from others and our environment. Interconnection and interdependence, the original state of unity with everything that exists before we are conscious, are abstract truths we must struggle to reminds ourselves of, though few of us ever have trouble objectifying what is around us.

This is why it is so easy for us to fall into dualistic thinking, understanding the world through its opposites, North and South, East and West, Heaven and Earth, body and soul, mind and matter, hot and cold, black and white, rich and poor, mine and yours, good and evil, me and you, us and them, and so on. These are the bipolarities of life. Dualistic thinking is foundational to Hellenistic philosophy, the ancient paradigm upon which our Western culture is founded. But it is also cross-cultural and cross-generational. Zoroastrianism, originating in Persia more than eight thousand years ago, is based upon the notion of two opposing forces, destruction and progress, governed by Ahura Mazda, Brilliant Wisdom. Manichaeism also emerged in Persia, during the 3rd Century CE, and is likewise based upon the dualistic idea that the cosmos exists as a battle between the spiritual forces of light and the material forces of darkness. And we are all familiar with the Taoist idea of *yin* and *yang* equally proportioned within a black and white circle.

Ultimate truth, according to Taoism, *Tai Chi*, is unified, which modern physicists apparently also suspect is true too, which is why they continue to search for a unified theory of everything. Yet human beings can only experience Ultimate Truth dualistically, as the polar opposites represented by the *yin/yang* mandala. This is why I often say the problem with the world isn’t black and white thinking; it’s black or white thinking. It’s becoming unbalanced by believing there is only one side of any equation—West, Southm, white, rich, mine, good, me, and, us.
In order for me to communicate with you at all, I must first distinguish myself from you. But if I completely detach myself from others, I should have no reason to communicate with anybody. Or if I should determine that my way is the only way, I will have no use for those who differ from me. If I am convinced I am right, then everyone else must be wrong. That’s black or white thinking—there can be only one side of the coin, black or white, good or evil, right or wrong, me or you, rich or poor, mine or yours, us or them, and so forth.

Black and white thinking, on the other hand, also acquiesces to the human condition, that is, to the emergence of consciousness through the process of differentiation, yet it is able to acknowledge that truth exists within the continuum between the opposites, that truth is relative not absolute, that between black and white exists grey, and between me and you is we, between my way and your way are many ways, between mine and yours is ours, and between right and wrong is better and worse.

I was a freshman in college the first time I ever heard the word “bipolarity.” It was during an Old Testament course, taught by a brilliant young professor, Dr. Randall Bush, now a professor of philosophy at Union University, in Jackson, Tennessee. He taught the subject from what he called a “Cultic” perspective, meaning he took into account the Old Testament writings in relationship to the beliefs and myths belonging to the surrounding cultures at which time the material was written. That’s bipolar thinking, that other points of view might also hold truth. In was in Dr. Bush’s class, for instance, that in addition to learning the Hebrew Creation story, I also first studied the Babylonian and Egyptian accounts, as well as others. The entire course was designed around several dualities—priestly and prophetic, growth and destruction, myth and history, cause and non-causal, dualism and monism, Sky Father and Earth Mother, Form and Emptiness, conflict and harmony, and even yin and yang—throughout which Dr. Bush continually reminded us that the truth continually fluctuates between to two poles.

The notion and importance of bipolarity has been foundational for me ever since, which is why I didn’t like it very much when the APA turned it into a disorder. In addition to it actually being a way to find order and meaning in the world, I now have to go to great lengths to explain its meaning, as I have just done, before I can use it without sounding like I’m talking about a mood disorder.

The other subject I first learned about in college, more than half my life ago now, was situation ethics, a theory of morality that goes hand-in-hand with the idea of bipolar truth. For, as the phrase insinuates, situation ethics suggests morality can’t be determined in advance of a particular circumstance, but must be figured out while in the thick of a moral problem, considering the best course of action in each new situation.
Joseph Fletcher, the author of *Situation Ethics*, first published in 1966, believed, “Only one ‘thing’ is intrinsically good, namely, love; nothing else at all.” Yet love is a principle, not a hard and fast, easily defined rule. Situation ethics says if following the rules is the most loving thing to do, then, by all means, we must follow the rules. But if the most loving outcome results from disobeying the rules, it is our moral obligation to disobey them. As the Christian Theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, “The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law.” Love negates the law because with it we don’t need the law. As Saint Augustine said, you can, “Love with care, then do whatever you want.” For if love is our predicate in all situations, then love will be the outcome. And love, according to Fletcher, is no mere sentiment. In the chapter of his book entitled, “Love and Justice Are the Same,” he says that, “Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else.”

Although he ended up an atheist, Joseph Fletcher was an Episcopal priest when he wrote *Situation Ethics*, and taught Christian Ethics at Episcopal Divinity School. Nevertheless, in a famous debate, he once stated that, “none of the Ten Commandments represents a normative principle for human conduct which is intrinsically valid or universally obliging regardless of the circumstances.” If breaking a Commandment is the most loving and, therefore, just thing to do, then it is also the right thing to do. Yet he considered *Situation Ethics* a Christian ethic because it emulates Jesus who violated the Sabbath law in order to feed the hungry and care for the sick. “The Sabbath was made for humankind,” he is reported to have said, “and not humankind for the Sabbath.” Fletcher believed Jesus predicated his moral behavior upon love, lived out, in this example, as the just distribution of food and healthcare.

Fletcher made this comments in 1971, during a debate at San Diego State University with John Warwick Montgomery, a Lutheran Theologian and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Montgomery argued that, “the biblical revelation constitutes a transcendent word from God establishing ethical values once for all... Situations are not only judged by absolute principles in this life; they will be so judged in the next.” In other words, the Ten Commandments must be followed always, regardless of the situation or the outcome.

So Fletcher decided to bring up a moral dilemma that had first been asked around the turn of the 19th century during a meeting of Kentucky’s Long Run Baptist Association, a question causing such a dispute that it ended up splitting the Association’s founding

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3 Fletcher, ibid. p. 13.
6 Mark 2:27.
7 Fletcher & Montgomer, ibid., p. 44 & 45.
congregation, the Long Run Baptist Church. It began when someone at the meeting asked a hypothetical question concerning whether or not it would be right or wrong to tell a lie in order to protect a child in hiding during an Indian raiding party. This came up because the gathering actually took place near the burial site of Abraham Lincoln’s grandfather who had been killed in just such a raid—the same raid that also came close to claiming the life of his son, future father of the President.

Church members disagreed so vehemently over the matter that the Association had to eventually intervene by declaring those who would tell the truth regardless of the consequences the legitimate Long Run Baptist Church. The others left to form another church about twenty miles away. Although they named theirs the Flat Rock Baptist Church, they were, for many years, referred to as the “lying Baptists.”

In responding to the same question, Professor Montgomery insisted that even in such a dire situation one must always tell the truth. Yet, when pressed by Fletcher to answer if he himself would actually tell the truth even if it cost a life, Montgomery finally admitted, “If, concretely, I were put in the position that you described of either informing a killer as to where a child was hidden or lying about it, it’s conceivable that I would have to lie. But if I did so, I would be unable to justify this ethically... In Christian terminology, I would have committed a sin, which should drive me to the Cross for forgiveness.”

In other words, Montgomery might try it, but he wouldn’t inhale.

I’m glad he wouldn’t actually risk a person’s life due to his puritanical beliefs, but the point I want to illustrate here is that morality ought to be practical. What good does it do for someone like Montgomery to insist his morality is absolutely right in every situation if even he’s unable and unwilling to live up to such extremism, leading to enduring feelings of personal shame and failure that, as he said, “drive” him to constantly seek forgiveness?

This gets us back to the subject of bipolarity. For when we understand, as Dr. Bush said, the truth is in flux between the extremes, then it becomes possible for us to find balance between them. Montgomery’s ethic allowed him only a black or white choice between becoming so rigid that his decision would either harm another or do something demoralizing to himself. He didn’t know how to live between these two extremes, understanding that in many circumstances lying is wrong because of the harm it causes, but in some circumstances it might be the best thing to do.

It would be wonderful if every ethical quandary before us truly were a simple right or wrong decision, but, as the saying goes, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Every decision is a moral dilemma, for everything we do has both positive and negative consequences. If I go to the grocery store and have forgotten to bring my own bags, is it better to ask for plastic or paper? To use a petroleum based product or to kill a tree? And if I do bring my own reusable bags, need I ask where,

8 Ibid., p. 51.
how, and by whom they were manufactured? What resources did they require and what was the impact on the environment? Were those who made them paid a fair wage, or were they made in a sweatshop? Should I drive to the store or take the bus? Or should I just walk everywhere or ride my bicycle so I don’t pollute the air? What if I don’t have time to walk? What about those who aren’t physically able to walk or ride bikes? Are they bad people because they drive or good people because they just stay home and never go anywhere? How can I eat when others are starving? How can I have a home when others are homeless?

Last week I preached against oil pipelines and coal trains. This week I’m flying all the way across the country in a jet airplane to lobby on behalf of increasing the national minimum wage in DC. And I’ll probably be packing some clothes made by low-wage workers somewhere in a foreign country. Doesn’t this make me a hypocrite, to drive cars and fly in airplanes while arguing against carbon based energy? What’s more important, the environment or making sure Eastern Washington is represented during an important legislative visit to our Nation’s Capital? What’s more important, clean air or helping the working poor to get a pay raise?

These kinds of question can drive us bonkers if we let them. But embracing the bipolar nature of our existence better enables us to find some place between the extremes that’s actually possible to live with. It helps us understand that there is a continuum between the absolute worst and the absolute best we can to. When it comes to the extremes, it’s nearly impossible to do either. But just because we can’t do the absolute best thing, doesn’t mean we give up entirely. We can still move as close to what is best on the continuum as we can. Maybe we become more diligent about bringing our reusable grocery bags to the store, or drive a car that is as fuel-efficient as we can afford. Perhaps we drive to the park and ride then take the bus the rest of the way to work. Or we limit how often or how far we drive and fly. Or maybe the best we can do is simply to acknowledge the system we’re in isn’t working and begin advocating for change. To say what we’re doing isn’t good doesn’t make us all hypocrites just because we haven’t yet come up with or established a better alternative. For there will never be any alternatives if we don’t.

I often think about Thomas Jefferson, an abolitionist who is known to have had hundreds of slaves. It is difficult not to look back and think, “What a hypocrite!” I don’t know if or how he justified such a contradiction, and don’t care to try making sense of it myself. But I do wonder if two hundred years from now someone might look back at my sermons and say, “Hey, he preached against global warming but he still drove a car and flew in airplanes. What a hypocrite!” In a clear cut, black or white world, that might be true. But in the world I live in, where work and life require us to travel vast distances in motorized vehicles, like most of us, I don’t have a theoretical, but a practical need to drive and sometimes fly. Somewhere along the continuum between the absolute worst and best I can do, I can limit how far I live from work, how much fuel my car consumes, how often and far I fly, while also offsetting my carbon footprint by reusing my shopping bags, helping to plant trees, supporting solar projects like the one on our church roof, and advocate for change.
The world isn’t black or white, it’s black and white, with lots of differing shades and colors in between. The notion of bipolar morality gives us permission to find a practical balance between right and wrong, between doing nothing and doing the best we can under the circumstances. As it is written in the *Tao te Ching*, “When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad.” Or, as Rumi said, “Somewhere, beyond all our ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there;” somewhere between the two.

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