

Committed to Justice: A Different and Lenten Kind of Diversity

February 7, 2016
Rev. Rebecca M. Bryan
First Parish in Brookline

Minister's Moment: Setting the Stage for this Day

Friends, as we move into the rest of our service, I would like to pause and address some questions that you might be asking yourself if you are looking ahead in the Order of Service. By providing this context, or setting the stage, my intention is to help us stand on common ground.

The theme of our service this morning is “Committed to Justice: A Different and Lenten Kind of Diversity.” This Wednesday starts the season of Lent, the most holy of times for Christian traditions throughout the world. Though often associated with having to give up things like chocolate, it’s theological purpose is to take time each year to reflect upon our lives and see if we are living a life consistent with our ideals. For Christians that ideal may be Jesus Christ. For others, it may be love or service or self-actualization. I view it, then, as a time to take stock of myself and my life to see if I am growing more into the person that I want to be.

We each have our own reactions about this season of Lent. For some it brings up deep wounds, for others skepticism or even cynicism. There are those beloved whose faces I look upon now who I imagine find Lent distasteful, or ridiculous. Maybe you haven’t given it much thought for a very long time, if ever.

Still.

There are others, here this morning, myself included, who are drawn to this time. This may be for religious reasons or family tradition, or perhaps, such as it is with me, it the call to ritual, to personal reflection. We don’t necessarily have those times built into a Unitarian Universalist church calendar.

So I propose that we each use this time called Lent, in whatever ways are meaningful to us. One of those ways is to use it for a time of self-reflection. We can also use it as a time to grow more comfortable with differences and aware of where we may not be open to them. All of these things; self-awareness, an ability and willingness to be uncomfortable at times, and an openness to learning about differences are essential skills for justice making. These three things give us the ability to make our tent wide; to truly create a place for everyone in this space.

Part of our service this morning may make some of you uncomfortable; for others it will be soothing. I ask all of us to be open to what it offers ---

Our second hymn this morning is “Precious Lord Take My Hand.” The story behind the hymn is powerful. The Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey, known by many to be the father of gospel music, wrote this hymn during a time of incredible personal despair. His wife and only child had just died

during child birth. The story is that he turned to his piano for solace and this beautiful music is what came out of him.

“Precious Lord Take My Hand” was The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior’s favorite hymn. It was also one of John Ross’s, a beloved past music director of this congregation, favorite hymns. To sing this hymn, just as it is written, is to honor their legacies.

At the same time we must honor ourselves. If you need to, change the word “Lord” to “friend” or “Life” or “Love.” Make this change if that is what you need to do to be true to yourself. Consider though not changing the words if doing so is to avoid feeling uncomfortable. A critical part of the journey to creating justice is to see our way through discomfort. It is in this walking that we can journey honestly with others in their discomfort. And in this discomfort we just may find beauty that we had never imagined.

Sermon:

My first two sermons here at First Parish as your Interim Senior Minister focused on the opening lines of your mission statement: “Called by Love” and “Sustained by Community.” We shared the concepts of love as accountable kindness and genuine connections as an essential component of a thriving community. This morning I will be talking about the third leg of your mission statement: “Committed to Justice.”

I think that we all understand what the words *Committed to Justice* mean but I have three questions this morning. First, what does it look like for a congregation to be committed to justice? Second, what is required of us, to do this faithfully, as a congregation, and third, what is required of us as individuals to be committed to justice.

The answer to the first question is that a congregation committed to justice looks diverse. Diverse not just in the composition of its members but also in how each of you live into that commitment. It cannot nor ought it look the same for all of us. Therein lies the answer to the next two questions. If it looks different for each of us to express our commitment to justice, it requires us to allow those differences to be honored in the congregation, and asks each of us as individuals to be truthful to what interests us and how we are called to live into that. The phrase that encompasses these concepts for me is: “Committed to Justice: A Place for Everyone and Every Part of Ourselves.” It is *both* how we accept the differences among us and how we accept and express all parts of ourselves. This may sound easier than it is. I want to explore challenges that get in the way of this being a reality.

I am going to talk first about how we too often exclude, or scapegoat, others. And then I will explore how this happens inside of each of us. How we become cut off from parts of who we are.

Commitment as we use it in Unitarian Universalism is about covenant, or promise. Commitment is not about conformity. There are myriad issues of social justice: black lives matter, immigration and climate justice, to name just a few. There is no way that any one of us can be involved, nor fully educated, about all of these issues.

We can however be responsible and responsive to the callings, the passions, the interests of our own heart and mind. What those issues are, and how we enact our commitment to them will vary as much as every individual. There is no right, there is your particular way, and that is *beautiful*.

Howard Thurman, theologian and Chaplain of Boston University from 1953-1965, and one of Martin Luther King's most influential mentors said this: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go and do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

So that is the how of it on the personal side. In order to create a truly broad and roomy tent, where there is a place for everyone, we need also to give others the same basic right. To know what makes them come alive, and to follow that.

This prescription for living is not easy, and is not taught by society at large. We could take all day about why that is the case, but that is for another time. Let us just agree, that in general, our society in America, teaches the opposite of a place for all. It teaches that there are right and wrong ways to be. We in our congregations fall prey to that as much as anyone else.

It is what is known sociologically and theologically as scapegoating. The practice of having insiders and outsiders. The practice is painful at best, and murderous far too often. For it is the weak who are on the outside.

We see this in children who are bullied, who are cast out of the common collective of children. We see this in warring countries. It is as old as humankind. The most difficult thing about it is that it repeats itself in cunning and insidious ways. The abused child who becomes an abuser. The persecuted group, who then persecutes another group. It is at the roots of racism in America with poor whites turning against the slaves brought here by wealthy landowners.

It is easier perhaps to see this in these large and atrocious situations; harder, I believe, to recognize it when it is happening in our midst, in our communities, and in ourselves. Certainly we know when we are the outsider; it takes an incredible amount of honesty and self-awareness to realize when we are the ones on the inside. But it happens every day.

This hurts. This fosters pain, lack of understanding. The opposite of what we strive for. A community where there is not a place for everyone. A truly integrated community like a truly integrated person, has room for all of its people, for all our parts. It is this authentic diversity that makes us most whole. To quote from our first reading this morning: "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

This scapegoating is recognized in other disciplines as well. Though not exactly the same, their impact on people, and the sense of being an insider or an outsider is the same. In organizational development it is described as siloing. In family systems theory as cutting off. Philosophically our country was founded on deep core values of individualism. This is an American thing.

This is one of the reasons why I believe so deeply in interfaith work. Refugee Immigration Ministries, an organization who works for the rights of immigrants and with whom many of our Parishioners have been engaged says this; “When Former RIM Clients were asked what helped them most at the worst time, each person, regardless of his or her faith tradition, gave a spiritual answer.”¹

Faith has been and continues to be a critical lifesaving resource to people in pain. People who are the outsiders. Part of our learning how not to scapegoat, or keep people out of our tent or our lives or our hearts, requires us to understand different faiths.

When I was ministering in a Connecticut city, our congregation was developing a relationship with a neighboring church, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. One day as the female pastor and I were talking about the date for our next joint gathering, I suggested a Wednesday evening. Her answer stopped me short and taught me again the importance of being able to hold religious differences in working together for justice.

“Florence, I said, why don’t we have our groups meet on Wednesday night at 7pm?” “That sounds wonderful however that is the night of our Bible study groups. I will need to ask permission of my presiding elder. He will let me know if I can miss Bible study.”

In that moment, my white, privileged, feminist, liberal, Congregationalist, minister perspective flared up. My instinct was to scapegoat Florence. To place her on the outside of these other perspectives that I held so dear. For a moment. Then because I knew and respected Florence deeply, I said simply, “Of course. Let me know what he says.”

Florence called me a day or two later to say that her male elder had given her permission and that our groups could meet on the Wednesday evening.

We did meet, we had yet another wonderful and honest dialogue that had been growing over time. Two weeks later the church shootings in South Carolina happened. This time it wasn’t just bad news.

This time, I immediately thought of Florence, and the members of her church. I remembered that she had grown up in Charleston, South Carolina. I called her with some trepidation, tears in my eyes. What if I said the wrong thing? I don’t remember exactly what I said, and I’m sure that it wasn’t perfect.

The next Sunday, members of the UU congregation that I was serving went to worship together at Florence’s church. (Not all of us by the way--others stayed back in our sanctuary and completed the blessing and thanking of volunteers. This is the diversity of commitment that is necessary in a congregation.)

Those of us who went to the AME church that morning sang hymns that had a lot of “Lords.” We swayed with the music. I was in wonder at the power that the members drew from their faith

¹ www.r-i-m.net

during this time. A faith that has sustained many through atrocities, for hundreds of years. Who am I am to not make space for that faith of my friends, my beloved companions on this journey of faith.

I know that you have had similar experiences here at First Parish. Celebrating Las Posadas with families from the Chelsea Collaborative Centro Presente, for example. The immigration task force names their work of solidarity; hearts without borders work. Ellen Blaney says of this work: “We’ve called our group here Hearts Without Borders, to remind ourselves that borders can be moved, resisted, and removed, particularly when it comes to our assumptions and intentions.” *This* is creating a world free of scapegoating. A world where everyone has a place.

This act of cutting off or not accepting happens not only among groups, it can also happen within ourselves. I believe that the work of self-reflection, of knowing ourselves genuinely and following our passions in the ways that we are called to do is essential spiritual work.

This cutting off from parts of ourselves happens for many reasons. One of the most common is when we internalize “shoulds.” When we are told explicitly or implicitly that what we feel, what we are called to believe, or be, is somehow wrong. All of us have been victims of this process. Often by those who love us the most and may be completely unaware that they have done this.

I invite you to join me in a brief guided meditation designed help us to integrate this concept of shoulding.

What has been “shoulded” or silenced in you?

Take a moment, with me, please. Feel your feet on the floor and your body in the pew. Breathe in slowly and exhale. Give yourself this moment to relax and reflect. What is it that you love to do? What are you doing when you feel most alive? Most joyful? Are you moving your body? In dance, walking, or sport? Are you alone, in nature, or with those that you love? Are you writing, or laughing, or painting? Hold that space and image.

Now think of something that you have always wanted to do or to try and never done. Or perhaps you tried once and failed. What is this passion, this interest, large or small? Did you want to play an instrument? Learn a new language? Flip turn in the pool? Or write your story?

How did it happen that you haven’t followed that call? Did someone tell you that it wasn’t important, or worthy, or manly or womanly, or productive? Is it something that you don’t do at your age? Too expensive? Too hard?

Take a moment and be with that desire. If nothing comes to you now that’s okay. Trust that it will. For nothing is too small, and when the time is right you will remember.

Ask yourself if maybe you would be willing to try, in some small way to bring that part of yourself to life? Even if it is just to spend time in the presence of what it is that you love.

If ever you were told that you were anything less than beautiful, anything less than whole, may you know now that the opposite is true. You are whole. You are worthy. Your desires are a necessary part of the you that is here on this earth to be known.

When you are ready wiggle your toes and fingers. Feel yourself come back to this space.

It is my deepest hope that First Parish be a place where that silenced part of you can come alive.

If you are interested in doing a writing practice to further this work, there is a handout in your order of service along with an invitation to join with others and share what we are learning along the way.

In our commitment to justice, let us not scapegoat, let us not silo, let us not should. Let us honor the gifts and uniqueness of each person, and not impose a right or wrong way to believe, to show our commitment.

Let us make our tent wide, let us make a place for everyone and for all of our true selves.

Amen and Blessed Be