

Conservatively Speaking

Given 8/26/2012 by Robin Mitchell

November 3, 2004 was a terrible morning to wake up and be a political liberal in America. George W Bush had just been re-elected, and whatever excuses you might have had after the 2000 election didn't work this time – you couldn't say that people only voted for him because they didn't know who he was, or that they didn't actually vote for him at all. This time, the American people had knowingly made a clear choice for the guy who represented pretty much everything you disliked.

One of the main forms of liberal despair that I heard in response to this, besides the occasional threat to move to Canada, was that they just couldn't imagine how anyone could vote for Bush after seeing him in office for four years. This was often said with a sort of embattled pride, as if not being able to understand such idiocy somehow insulated them from it, as if it helped prove their superiority.

But I read an editorial a few months after the election that framed this pose a little differently. It said that not being able to even imagine what motivated 62 million of your fellow citizens was a stunning failure of imagination, not something to be proud of. It's one thing to disagree with them, or to be repelled by the consequences of their values in action. But to be entirely unable to even imagine the hopes, the dreams, the ideals, the fears or the values of so many people in your own country is to be unable to imagine living in any kind of meaningful community with them.

And today is a difficult time to be a religious liberal, in America or anywhere else. Our numbers are very small – there are 1,041 UU congregations in the entire world, which by coincidence is almost exactly the number of Christian churches in San Diego County alone. And our visible public influence is also very small – the major sources of political and cultural liberalism in the world are secular, not religious. There are no liberal religious figures with the standing of a Pope Benedict or a Pat Robertson, or with the political clout of a Rick Santorum or even a Mike Huckabee. When you turn on the evening news, it's all Religious Right, all the time.

And the response I hear among religious liberals is often an echo of the political despair from 2004. We can't imagine how values so different from ours could appeal to so many people. What is wrong with all those people who aren't us? And in our defense, it really is baffling sometimes - when we see the Anglican and Episcopal churches splitting over female bishops or gay clergy, or Catholic bishops attacking their own nuns for spending too much time feeding the poor and tending the sick and not enough time agitating against gay marriage, it's sometimes hard to come up with a more coherent response than "what's wrong with these people?"

But as in 2004, I suspect this failure of imagination isn't a healthy response. If we can't imagine the ideals and values of our conservative brethren and sistren, how can we imagine being in loving community with them?

So what does it mean when we say that religious conservatives don't share our values? We typically mean things like religious and intellectual openness, inclusiveness, and free thinking. They, of course, will see all this from the opposite direction; to them, we're the ones who don't share their values. And the thing is, they may have a point.

In a recent book called "The Righteous Mind", Jonathan Haidt claims that our brains are hard-wired for moral reasoning; that, like our other powers of reasoning, culture may shape how we express them but doesn't change their basic form.

He claims to have found six components of moral perception that appear across all cultures and times, moral notions that are less a product of culture than a source of it. They are caring, fairness, liberty, in-group loyalty - standing up for your side against the other - respect for authority, and sanctity or purity. These basic values, he says, underlie the moral codes that have allowed us to band together in the large cooperative groups that have made us so successful as a species.

And although I suspect it's possible to quibble with his specifics, what really interests me is what he did next. He created a test people could take that showed how much they personally valued five of those values (for some reason he left out 'liberty') and gave it to people all across the political spectrum. And what he found was very interesting.

He found that the first two values, caring and fairness, were valued almost equally across the spectrum - political liberals valued them slightly more than conservatives, but only slightly. But the remaining three - loyalty, authority and sanctity - were very different. Conservatives rated them fairly high; lower than caring and fairness, but still fairly high. But support fell off dramatically as you went leftward, with liberals rating them much, much lower. And while liberals might say that they've evolved beyond those things, his provocative conclusion is that political liberals are like people who are partially color-blind, able to see some colors but not others, making them miss things that seem obvious to others.

This would explain some different types of political arguments that I've seen. When liberals and conservatives argue about taxes, for example, they're both arguing about the shared value of fairness. They may have very different ideas about how fair it is for the government to take money from rich people and give it to poor people, but both sides have a common vocabulary for their argument. But when it comes to something like flag-waving, America-first patriotism, the two sides are more likely to stare at each other in mutual incomprehension. Liberals don't share the in-group loyalty that seems so obvious to conservatives, so both sides end up not being able to imagine what the other is thinking.

Now I want to be clear that this sermon is about religion and not politics, but it seems likely that these values would work the same way there. Morality certainly plays at least as large a role in religion as it does in politics (the jokes here are so obvious that I'm not even going to try). And it seems to match what I've seen myself. Here at our very liberal Fellowship, the sermons pretty much run the gamut from caring to fairness. But at my Methodist church, which is a liberal-leaning mainline Protestant church but definitely more theologically conservative than we are, the sermons and services include those values but also emphasize sanctity and respect for scripture and tradition. And for evangelicals and fundamentalists, who are much more theologically conservative, sanctity and respect for scripture are almost absolute values.

If this is true it explains some things, such as why we don't seem to appeal to a wider group of people, but it doesn't get at the thing that I suspect bothers us most about the people we call the Religious Right - the intense energy they devote to

social and political activism in directions that seem completely perverse to us. Why are they so politically active against women's rights and gay marriage and so indifferent to the politics of inequality that might actually help the poor and the powerless?

The answer may lie in something else Mr. Haidt said about conservatives - he said that the great conservative insight is that order is very hard to achieve, it's very precious, and it's very easy to lose. And this naturally leads to wanting to support and preserve the institutions that embody that order. I think this is a vital insight; it balances the great progressive insight that it's very easy for institutions to use their power to benefit the elite and exclude everyone else. Ideally our politics would be a dialectic between the conservative impulse to preserve and the progressive impulse to reform, and if it often falls short that still doesn't invalidate either impulse.

So think about one institution that's near and dear to many religious conservatives - the institution of marriage. Liberals see its value clearly enough, and when you add the traditional and scriptural weight it has for conservatives then you can see why they see it as precious and even sacred - to Catholics, it's one of the seven sacraments, one of the signs of God's grace made visible in the world.

And by almost any standard it's struggling these days. The divorce rate is over twice what it was during the halcyon days of the Fifties and the incidence of out-of-wedlock births is more than eight times higher, standing now at over 40%. The percentage of children living in single-parent households has tripled since 1960 and the number of unmarried couples living together is up more than tenfold. Few of these statistics should be making anyone happy, and religious conservatives feel them especially painfully and blame them on a society that is drifting further and further from the Biblical morality that they believe was once the basis for marriage.

And in the middle of all this peril comes a bunch of people who want to radically redefine marriage by opening it to homosexual unions, in their eyes completely destroying what is left of its God-given moral foundations. It's like throwing an anchor to a drowning man, and their strong reactions may have nothing to do with hating gays.

Indeed, after backing Proposition 8 in a big way, the Mormon Church turned around and supported a gay-rights bill in Utah that included civil unions, saying "The church supports these ordinances because they are fair and reasonable and do not do violence to the institution of marriage." This sounds exactly like the conservatism that Mr. Haidt described, wanting to preserve traditional institutions but still valuing fairness.

This kind of fear-based, embattled conservatism may feel very foreign to us and yet it isn't entirely. For example, think about the environment - environmentalists used to be called conservationists, precisely because they held the conservative attitude about the natural world: that the environment is precious, that there will be great suffering among humans and other species if it is disrupted; and that it is easy to lose, that human activity is ever more rapidly unweaving the interconnected web of all life.

And how do we react to this? How do we react when, after decades of seeing the environment degraded by pollution and overexploitation, we see the rise of global warming that threatens to radically destabilize ecosystems across the entire planet?

Many of us react with a passionate energy born of the fear of the consequences we can see coming; the kind of energy that will be needed if we are to stop things before it's too late.

But this fear-based energy has the same effects on us that we see in other conservatives. Earlier this summer, one of our speakers vividly described the costs of failing to quickly turn global warming around and then confessed that he personally couldn't help seeing the people fighting against those efforts - like Exxon and the Koch brothers - as evil. That's the word we use for people who are willing to inflict great suffering on others for their own selfish reasons, and I was glad to hear him say openly what I've heard other people say more quietly.

So the next time you're at a rally for marriage equality and someone from the other side comes up to you and says that what you're doing is evil, before you shake your head at fundamentalist intolerance think of the words you have heard from this very pulpit and consider that they might be feeling the same way. Of course we don't think that's what's happening - we truly believe that we're helping the institution of marriage by making it more equitable, while no one who is pouring CO₂ into the atmosphere really thinks they're helping the environment - but that's not the way it looks from their side.

So where does this leave us? I almost chickened out of writing this sermon because I couldn't think of a hopeful, motivational ending. If religious conservatives are really driven by different values than we are then we're not ever going to convert them no matter how much we advertise or how good our elevator speeches are. And at the same time I certainly don't want us to stop fighting for our values - the elements of our "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign, things like marriage equality and humane immigration policies, are basic human-rights issues, things that we can't let go of without betraying who we are. So what do we do?

What I'm describing is the challenge of capital-L liberalism, of passionately standing up for our principles while honoring the diverse society we live in. This is not easy, but it's the road we have chosen, and I do have two concrete suggestions that I think are both good strategy and also good for our souls.

The first is to be careful of the language we use to describe people who disagree with us on social issues. Some people may indeed oppose our stands on marriage equality or immigration because of hatred or bigotry, but many are standing up for what they see as honorable institutions that we are threatening. Abraham Lincoln said "Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?", and insulting people is rarely a good way to start making friends. Rather than accusing our opponents of standing on the side of hate, it is better to emphasize our shared concern with the things they feel are being threatened, like marriage or the American middle class.

And the second is to look for places where we have shared values and can work together. Remember that we all honor the values of caring and fairness, and there are places where we share their conservative values. There are evangelicals working for the environment and fundamentalists staffing food banks, and we shouldn't let religious partisanship stop us from finding common ground with them.

I know from personal experience how hard this can be - years ago I came across a headline saying that Wiley Drake, the Southern Baptist minister who had launched

the big boycott of Disney because they were giving employee benefits to same-sex couples, was in trouble with his local city council. Now I thought his boycott was especially perverse - whether or not you agree with any particular boycott, the idea of saying "we're not going to do business with you until you start treating your employees better" has a compelling moral logic. So when he started saying "we're not going to do business with you until you start treating your employees worse" I was sure he was just the worst person in the world. And so when I saw this headline I instantly clicked on it to see what new awful thing he was up to.

But when I opened the article I felt strangely disappointed - his awful crime was letting homeless people camp on his church grounds. He was in trouble for standing on the side of love! I didn't want to hear that then, and I suspect that many of us wouldn't want to hear it today. But if he did that again, here in Solana Beach, I hope that we would see his caring and moral courage for what they were and be inspired by them. Maybe we'd be moved to loan him cots, or stand up for him at a City Council meeting, or even to take the risk of sheltering homeless people ourselves and getting the City Council mad at us too.

I urge us all to never lose sight of our fundamental value of love, and to honor and be inspired by it wherever it appears. May we never allow our religious and political opinions to blind us to the loving and lovable side of all the people who make up our diverse society. For if we cannot imagine the love in them then we truly cannot imagine the beloved community of all souls.

May that be so.