

Welcoming Congregations

Given 4/7/19 by Robin Mitchell

Guided Meditation

I invite you now to sit in a position that is comfortable but alert; put both feet on the floor if that helps ground you, and take a minute to center yourself in this place.

Now bring to mind a time when you were rejected because of some part of who you were – perhaps your age, your gender, your body type, your skin color, your sexuality, your mental health; something that had nothing to do with your character, but was simply part of who you were.

Notice how the memory of that pain manifests in your body. Does it come as a tightness, or a heaviness, or a sensation of heat or numbness? Welcome it as a guest and take a moment to just sit with it; it's something you've been carrying with you for a long time.

Now breathe that sensation into your heart center where it can be transformed, and breathe out its opposite. If it comes as heaviness, breathe in heaviness and breathe out lightness; if it comes as a tightness, breathe in tightness and breathe out opening. Do this with each breath, breathing in the pain, transforming it in your heart, and breathing out its antidote.

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Now expand your awareness to everyone who has been rejected because of who they were: people who aren't seen as fully human because of their gender, skin color or economic class; gay, lesbian and transgender people who have been rejected by their families or their churches; all the people who don't fit the dominant narrative of who matters in society. Breathe in their pain along with your own, transform it in your heart, and breathe out healing for them as well as for yourself.

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I welcome you back with words from the Sufi teacher Pir Vilayat Khan: "Overcome any bitterness that may have come because you were not up to the magnitude of pain that was entrusted to you. Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, each one of us is part of her heart, and therefore endowed with a certain measure of cosmic pain. You are sharing in the totality of that pain."

Sermon

As many of you know, the Methodist church has been in the news lately, and not in a good way. About a month ago they held a special conference where they voted to double down on their official position marginalizing gays and lesbians, and ever since then I've been having friends here ask me about it. Some of them were genuinely concerned about what this meant for me, and others have been a little snarkier – "what do you think of your Methodist friends now?" – and so this morning I want to

talk about what happened and what I think it means, and how this business of being a welcoming congregation can take you to some revealing and uncomfortable places.

To put all this in context, the Book of Discipline, the official statement of Methodist principles, sends mixed messages about inclusiveness. On one hand, it says "The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth", and describes our commitment "not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends." But it also says "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," and because of that "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" cannot be ordained as ministers, and ministers cannot perform same-sex weddings.

There has been a growing pushback to this from progressives in the church; the Western Jurisdiction, of which my church is a part, has been ordaining gay clergy and performing same-sex weddings for years; three years ago we consecrated a lesbian woman as a bishop. And you may remember a few years ago when I posted a link to a sermon our then-minister gave opposing the official policy, reminding us how the Gospel of love calls us to joyfully welcome all people.

But there are also traditionalists in the church who read Scripture more literally than we do and strongly believe in the current language, and so this all came to a head at a Special General Conference in late February. The progressives brought a plan that allowed individual churches to decide how inclusive they wanted to be, and the traditionalists countered with a plan that kept the existing language and increased the penalties for violating it. Even though two-thirds of the US delegates voted against the traditionalist plan, delegates from overseas, mostly Africa, voted for it and it narrowly passed.

This came as a shock to us; like many of us here after the last Presidential election, we couldn't believe what our church or country had done and we don't yet have a firm plan for what happens next. A lot of it is out of our hands; we don't know how much of the new plan will actually make it into church law, nor how hard the traditionalists will try to force us to comply with it, so for now there is a lot of uncertainty. In my heart I suspect that the church will end up splitting over this issue, which I think will be a tragedy – our founder, John Wesley, said "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" and it breaks my heart to see us failing to live up to that.

But one thing I do know, that I have complete confidence in, is that the Methodists in our Western Jurisdiction will continue to affirm and protect the dignity and humanity of their LGBT members. I have heard the sermons by both the minister of my church and the bishop of our region in the aftermath of the conference, and both of them were absolutely fierce in their defense of all God's children. They really understand the devastating pain that is caused when your church – the place you look to see God's love and grace manifesting in this world – when that church tells you that you don't fully deserve that love and grace. And I trust that they are going to do whatever it takes to keep that pain from being inflicted on their people.

But the other reason I'm staying, the reason that I'm really here to talk about this morning, faces in the other direction. I am deeply moved, not only by the progressives' support for their vulnerable members, but also by their attitudes towards the traditionalists. I have seen righteous anger at the harm they are causing to vulnerable people, and at the political scheming they have used to institutionalize that harm, but I have also heard a deep desire to remain in

community with them as beloved companions. The head Bishop of our conference said that he has moved from having “a heart at war” to “a heart at peace”, a heart that yearns to love and understand his opponents. We understand that in their minds they are defending the Scripture that we all love, even if it frustrates us to see them missing its point and using it to hurt people instead.

This matters for my own congregation, because the traditionalists aren't just in other regions where we don't have to see them. As I said, both the previous and current ministers there have given powerful sermons in favor of inclusiveness, and both times the congregation applauded them at the end, something that's as rare there as it is here. But both times I noticed that not everyone in the pews was clapping; the divide between progressives and traditionalists runs through my church as well. The people I worship with, serve beside, and look to for inspiration don't all think like me, and continuing to welcome them in my church family will be hard but, I think, existentially important.

Because this question of who we welcome gets to the heart of who we are and how we see our mission. We at this Fellowship have for years made certain choices here – I remember many years ago when we were debating whether to officially become a Welcoming Congregation, one man stood up and said “If anyone has any problems with homosexuality, we don't want them in this Fellowship!” And just a few months ago I was talking to someone here about the different language my two churches use about people who disagree with them on justice issues, and how the Methodists sounded a lot less judgmental than us, and they asked in a scandalized voice “Would a racist be welcome at your Methodist church?”

I thought that was such a good question – who are we when the going gets tough? – that I went and asked a bunch of my Methodist friends, including one of our ministers, and after some uncomfortable reflection they all said yes, a racist would be welcome in our church. Their racism wouldn't be – I would expect us to be as fiercely protective of our non-white and immigrant members as we are of our gay and transgender members – but they themselves would be welcome in our church family just as I hope our anti-gay members remain welcome.

That might surprise us here, but it really shouldn't. I think our core values aren't that different from theirs, that maybe their Christian spine just helps them stay a little more focused on those values in our current political climate.

As a Christian church we Methodists are called to follow the teachings and the example of Jesus, a man who caused a scandal in his own time by hanging out with sinners, with prostitutes and tax collectors. He welcomed everyone who sought him out; the only people he condemned were the Pharisees, the self-appointed virtue police who went around judging who was or was not “religiously correct”.

And as Christians, the core of our belief is that God's grace can redeem everyone and that we are called to participate in that redemption. Our minister loves to remind us that we are an Easter people because resurrection is at the heart of our creed.

I know you've all heard the hymn “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Our UU hymnals are a little nervous about that word “wretch” – they suggest you might want to sing the word “soul” instead – but the man who wrote it, John Newton, used that word advisedly. He had been a slave trader – he

wasn't just a casual racist; he was a professional racist; he made his living at it, and kept on even after he converted to Christianity. But grace was at work in his soul; he left the slave trade and became a clergyman and then a forceful abolitionist who worked to undo the damage he had done. He credited Christianity with changing his heart, which might never have happened if the church hadn't welcomed him as he was.

And I can't think of a better place for a racist to spend her Sunday mornings than at my Methodist church. A church where, when she joins, she will be welcomed by our baptismal liturgy into "the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races." A church whose mission statement begins with the words "welcome all", whose minister reminds us every month at Communion that this is the Lord's table, open to all, and always stresses that "all means all!"

This ought to speak to us UU's as well, maybe replacing the word "God" with the word "Love". We believe that love can heal the hearts of even deeply broken people and that we are called to be the agents of that love in the world.

But as good as that sentiment is, there is smugness and condescension in it if we leave it there: that we, the virtuous and healthy people, will love those other damaged and broken souls back into wholeness. The Christian Gospel doesn't let us get away with that kind of arrogance; it reminds us that we're all broken in some ways and holy in others, that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

And so the other reason I think we would feel called to welcome a racist or a heterosexist is our faith not only that we have the healing they need, but that they may manifest the grace that we need. Our faith tells us that God – that Love – is so powerful that it can break through in anyone to work good, not just in the people we think are virtuous.

We had a great sermon about this a few months ago where the guest preacher told the story of the Good Samaritan. He reminded us that the key to the story is knowing that the Jews hated the Samaritans for betraying them and their God when the Babylonians invaded and sent them off to exile; they saw them all as 'deplorables' who had colluded with a hostile foreign power. But when a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus who was the neighbor that he was supposed to love as he loved himself, Jesus told the story of a man who was attacked by robbers and left for dead by the side of a road. Two virtuous Jews passed by and ignored him, but then a Samaritan came by and dressed his wounds, took him to an inn, and paid for his care. Who, Jesus asked, had been that man's neighbor? Who had assumed the obligations of kinship to him? The Samaritan, the deplorable, who acted as the hands and feet of Love while still being the thing Jesus's audience despised.

So the point here is not that we should help others, or others who are different from us, although we certainly should. The point is that we should look for goodness and love even in the people we've been taught to see as flawed and broken, because if love can't break through and use them to do good in this world in spite of all their flaws then it probably can't really use us either and the world is irrevocably doomed. And as people of faith, as Easter people, we refuse to believe that in spite of what our anger and self-righteousness may tell us.

In a study group there we're reading a book called "Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People." The author talks about learning that one of her heroes, who had pioneered women's leadership in the church and had been the first female bishop in the United States, had also been a virulent racist. Writing about the shock and confusion she felt, she says "Personally, I think knowing the difference between a racist and a saint is kind of important. But when Jesus again and again says things like the last shall be first and the first shall be last, and the poor are blessed and the rich are cursed, and that prostitutes make great dinner guests, it makes me wonder if our need for pure black-and-white categories is not true religion but maybe actually a sin... What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through ... human beings, all of whom are flawed."

So when the dust settles from this Methodist controversy I hope the people who weren't applauding the sermons are still there in the pews. I hope so because I am called to love them even when it hurts my heart, because I want them to be in a community of love and grace where they can perhaps learn to see my humanity and that of my LGBT brothers and sisters, and because I am told to expect great things of them; they may be the Good Samaritans who show me what love looks like acted out in the world.

And so for all the people who asked if I am staying in my Methodist church, the answer is "yes". I am staying because I feel loved and protected by my branch of it, and because I so admire the spirit with which we are engaging our opponents. Our attempt to stand up for what is right while still being in loving communion with the people we think are wrong and are causing harm seems so important to me right now, in a country that is so polarized and where that spirit is so often missing. I want to be part of that, and I hope we can take the lessons of it out into the wider world that so desperately needs more examples of reaching out in love.

Since I'm filling in for Rev. Meghan this morning, I think it's only fair that I steal the ending of one of her sermons to end mine. She said "Let us rededicate ourselves to living the message that Jesus so clearly ... articulated. Love God above all else, and love your neighbor, which means everyone. There are no strangers on earth."

And to that I would just add that there are no Samaritans on earth, no deplorables; there's just us, God's children all.

Amen.

Closing Words

Our closing words are by the Methodist Bishop Grant Hagiya:

We are part of the church of Jesus Christ, whose main purpose is to love God and our neighbor the same way we love ourselves. We should be taught not to win but to sacrifice, not to overpower but to love, not to conquer but to show compassion, not to lecture but to listen. In short, we should be taught to have a heart at peace, not at war.