

Sermon Beloved Conversations 10.11.20
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So a funny thing happened on the way to this sermon. When I chose the topic Beloved Conversations a month ago, I assumed that the Beloved Conversations anti-racism project that 40 of us are starting would be underway. We'd have begun our first sessions and there would be all kinds of interesting things to talk about today. Well, between then and now, the start date was pushed back to October 15. So the topic of this sermon is taking a turn. But maybe it's a good metaphor. Conversations often take us on different turns to places that we don't expect.

I had an experience back in 2017 that's a good example of that. There's a national group called the three percent. They say that they are not a militia but they sure behave like one. The Anti-Defamation League categorizes them as anti-government extremists who are part of the militia movement. They call themselves the three percenters because they claim that during the American Revolution, only 3 percent of the colonists fought. That's wrong, of course, it was closer to a third, and anyone who knows anything about fighting wars knows that for every person out front pulling a trigger there are three people behind them offering the logistical support. Anyway, I sometimes see their logo around town. It's Roman numeral three and a percent sign.

Back in 2017, which seems so long ago, the local 3 percenter chapter tried to hold a recruiting event in the plaza in front of Buffalo City Hall. The anti-racism group I was working with decided to hold a counter-protest, so on a very cold day we found ourselves on the plaza too. It was an awkward thing really. There were about 20 of them gathered on one side, carrying lots of American flags, and about 20 of us on the other side, holding our Black Lives Matter signs. For a while, it was just us looking at them and them looking at us.

Finally, one of their members began walking towards us. We braced, wondering what would happen next. And he walked up to me and put out his hand and said "I just want to say hello. We're all just practicing our first Amendment rights here." Well, I shook his hand said thanks. His name was Ray, and we started to talk about why we were all there. And slowly, his group drifted over and pretty soon we were in groups of 3 or 4, just talking. Now some of theirs and some of ours wouldn't have it, and moved to the side or just walked in circles around the square with their signs. But I stood there for a very cold hour, asking them what they were about and what they wanted.

It was apparent from talking to these folks that they were not benefiting from the system. They talked about being unemployed and having lousy health care and not being able to see a dentist. And this takes me back to our reading in Parker Palmer. In his book "Healing the Heart of Democracy, he talks about how every person's problem with the current system, every source of anger or cynicism has its roots in a heartbreak that is real. And to really listen, to truly hear someone, we first have to understand that heartbreak.

Here's where it gets weird though: a heartbreak can be real even if it's not justified. Parker Palmer encourages us to listen to a person's stories of their life. Not their political soundbites, not their gotcha lines but the things that happened to them that broke their hearts. Most of the 3 percenters I talked to could name a thing that happened to them that led them to this place of complaint. But their thinking went sideways from there. Instead of blaming a capitalist economy that enriches a few at the expense of the many, they wanted to blame immigrants and the welfare state. Their heartbreak was real but their conclusions were utterly wrong.

And I remember one guy in particular, a really outspoken and argumentative guy. As he blamed the government over and over for the problems of this country, I kept asking him how this affected him personally. He kept deflecting and deflecting, but finally he said that his boss's business had some land taken away from him so the local post office could expand.

I had to work hard not to laugh in his face. That was the source of all his anger? Are you kidding me? And it occurred to me that sometimes the heartbreak is not a genuine personal loss but just the difficult work of accepting that everyone deserves a seat at the table. It was then that I realized that his larger heartbreak had nothing to do with the government seizing land in a strip mall by eminent domain. This white guy felt that somehow he was losing something by giving equal treatment to women and queer folks and people of color, and it made him angry.

It's complicated, isn't it? A person's feelings can be real and also false at the same time. It shows how challenging conversations can be.

It doesn't mean that conversations don't have value. They have more value than ever. But it tells us that different conversations have different purposes. And sometimes we need to think more deeply about the feelings that people have, and why they have them.

I want to encourage everyone to have conversations with folks who might disagree with them, and make an effort to listen for the heartbreak. I see my resistance to this all the time. I'll hear my neighbor talk about how covid is a hoax, and a million slam dunk retorts come to mind. That's me, really loving the feeling of being right. But being right *in that way* isn't gonna change his mind, and it's certainly gonna make him feel less like a neighbor and less likely to talk to me.

Folks love to be heard, and they feel validated when people ask them about their real life. And that can be difficult for me to hear because it complicates my black and white answers that I have a huge stockpile of. And it forces me to think a little more deeply. And, perhaps most important, it makes me more human. Hearing other people's stories enlarges our humanity.

I'm going to change here to talk about a different kind of conversation. Let me start by talking about having conversations with folks that we disagree with. I encourage folks to do that but there's a big exception: if you are a person who is chronically marginalized, if your daily experience is to be thought less of by the mainstream, you have no obligation to hear more hateful speech. The simple act of living in a hostile society exempts you from having to have

these kinds of conversations. I hear from people in this congregation about the daily struggle to stay positive and afloat. Protect yourself as you need to. Leave the work of these difficult conversations to folks who are not marginalized, who enjoy the privilege of being cisgender or male or white or upper middle class. Staying whole is enough.

That relates to a kind of conversation that is increasingly becoming normal. I'm talking about conversations within a community, for the sake of that community. This is when a group with a specific identity, like being queer, or a person of color, or male, get together in a space that is just them. It doesn't mean never talking to folks within the larger community. It's just a time that allows for sharing with a group of people who share a common identity and experiences.

For example, in the Beloved Conversations program (that hasn't quite started yet) the group work happens in what they call caucuses, where people are organized by their racial identity. There are many reasons for this strategy. For Black, Indigenous and other People of Color, this creates a space for people to do their own work. One thing that can happen in mixed race spaces is that people of color can be placed on a pedestal as the authority on all things related to race. That's never true, and also the thing about being placed on a pedestal is that there's no room to grow. Caucuses also create a space where Black, Indigenous, and other people of color can unpack their own stuff about race. For example, it's a place where a Hispanic person can think about any internalized anti-blackness that they might have.

For white folks, white caucus spaces can produce a lot of anxiety. They show up to do the work of anti-racism and wonder how they're going to do it when there's no Black folks around. But white-only spaces can give a place for white folks to cultivate their understanding of themselves as white people separate from people of color. They can better understand how white identity is formed, and what messages they still hold from that formation. It's also a place where white folks can worry less about hurting the feelings of people of color when they say a difficult thing that they believe.

One of the things that I've sometimes seen in white progressive spaces is that they are deeply grounded in guilt and shame. I know that the Beloved Conversations project is hoping to create a space that is grounded in love and support for each other.

These kinds of caucus spaces already happen within our church. There are a couple of men's groups that explore male identity in a spirit of compassion and mutual support. There is the People of Color group. And there are subgroups with specific spiritual interests like Paganism and Christianity.

These groups don't divide us. They do the opposite. In these individual places of beloved conversation, individuals foster their well-being. And the well-being of the individual is connected to our well-being as a congregation.

These different groups tell us a truth about this large congregation: That we are a community of communities. The Unitarian Universalist leader and writer Paula Cole Jones has done amazing work building out this idea of church as a community of communities. We have many communities at First U, and they overlap: single parents, elders, multi-racial families, neurodiverse folks and the list goes on. And if you're a part of a group that doesn't have a structured meeting, think about starting one. We recognize many paths into the larger congregation and these paths shouldn't be separate and siloed but rather support each other and work together for the mission of the church.

All of this is to say that a congregation is a place of many conversations. Some of those conversations take place in spaces that have boundaries. Some of those conversations happen in larger groups. For me, the space where the conversation is happening is less important than the quality of the conversation.

In whatever the space, I pray that our conversations are an invitation to listen for each other's heartbreak. I pray that they're an opportunity to show up with curiosity and compassion, rather than a need to win the conversation. I pray our conversations make us more human, more whole, and more loving. May it be so.