

“Welcoming the Other”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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Reading

“My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears” by Mohja Kahf

Sermon

I have shared in the past that in my first several weeks attending a Unitarian Universalist church I would often sit in one of the back pews of the sanctuary with tears streaming down my face. I was moved to tears not only by the beautiful music and moving sermons, though these were certainly factors. These were also tears of joy, grief, and relief as I realized that in that sanctuary, I belonged, all of me belonged. And, not only did I belong, but so did everyone else in that sanctuary. The black dad and white mom with their biracial children. The struggling grocery clerk. The blind singer and piano player. The atheist. The Jew. The former Catholic. We all belonged.

The inclusion and expanded sense of welcome that I felt in that sanctuary week after week, and that is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, was an antidote for me to the divisive political climate of our country at the time.

It was 2006 and the feeling in Washington, DC, where I lived, and in many parts of the country was similar to today. Battles lines had been drawn between red and blue. As a nation, we were becoming more and more entrenched in our ideological and political

differences with very few hopeful signs of compromise or movement towards a shared vision of the common good.

The inclusionary vision held in that sanctuary of how we could offer welcome to one another both within our church community and also in the broader public sphere drew me in and breathed life into my faltering sense of unity in a divided world.

Today, we as a global community, as a nation, and as individuals, are in desperate need of re-imagined welcome. The division and conflict in our broader society endangers our democracy and also damages our psyches and spirits.

There are many ways that we can misunderstand one another and push one another away. The reading I shared by Mohja Kahf is a story about misunderstanding. The narrator can plainly see how apparently at odds the women are who find themselves sharing a bathroom at Sears. Her grandmother performs what she deems a sacred and obligatory ritual of ablution. The other women regard her with disbelief and disgust. All of them value so dearly cleanliness and decorum but are not able in that moment to bridge the gap of their cultural differences.

How often do we find ourselves in this same position? So sure that our way of doing things is the “right” way. So convinced of this truth that we are unable to imagine another’s perspective.

Science tells us that this propensity to create an “us” and a “them” is hardwired into our brains. Human beings evolved to notice differences and to categorize other creatures and even others within our species as part of our group or our tribe, or outside of our group in order to survive. Some scientific studies have concluded that this trait can be found in other species as well.¹

¹ “‘Us versus them’ social traits may have evolved in monkeys before humans,” July 20, 2016, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/07/160720094643.htm>

There is a part of this tendency that is healthy. We crave a sense of belonging. We want to feel welcomed into a group, and it feels good to offer welcome to others. This is why we join churches, and choirs, and support groups, and frisbee teams, and Facebook groups for knitters or new parents or science fiction lovers. These group connections, like the ones we form right here in this congregation, contribute to a sense of well-being and happiness. They help us feel less alone.

However, this natural drive to belong when coupled a fear of “the other” can create deep divisions in our society. I don’t think I need to recount for you the many ways our propensity towards tribalism is threatening our very democracy. It is something that we are all caught in, whether you consider yourself liberal or conservative, whether you live in the city or out in the country, no matter where and how you get your news.

As our anxiety ratchets up, we are even more prone to plant ourselves more firmly into our divides, to withdraw from engagement with whoever we deem to be “the other” rather than offering welcome and hospitality.

Any of us who feel we are under threat - whether it’s because we are losing our place in society or the values that we hold dear are being challenged every day - can have a tendency to clamp down more rigidly.

The real threat, I believe, is that in continuing to act on an “us” versus “them” mentality, we make one another, those we might actually have something in common with, into the enemy.

On the most basic level, the need to welcome “the other” into our lives is necessary so that we don’t turn “the other” into an enemy to be kept out or defeated.

In his book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, Parker Palmer identifies five “habits of the heart,” (borrowing from Alexis de Tocqueville) that he proposes help make democracy possible. One of these habits is an appreciation of the value of “otherness.”²

Valuing difference, he says, is a necessary practice in our pluralistic society.

It is something I think we get to practice with one another even here within our church walls. The act of offering someone a welcome - whether it’s a first time visitor or someone you’ve known for quite some time - can be a time to practice finding commonality rather than turning someone into “the other.”

For anyone who might be wondering how to do this, I refer you to this handy guide developed by our Unitarian Universalist Association. It covers the basics of intercultural hospitality, and encourages us to say things like, “Hi, I haven’t met you. My name is…” instead of “Hi, You must be new.” Or, “What did you think of the worship service? I loved the story.” instead of “What college did you go to? What do you do for a living?”

A basic tenet of these guidelines is that true welcome is offered through inviting, listening, and rejecting assumptions.

It is through relationships and being open to change that we can counteract our most basic instincts to cling to false notions of “us” and “them.”

I want to share an example of this that I heard about from our broader national community. It is a story of something unexpected that happened last week in Washington, DC. You may have heard that there were a few different rallies organized on the National Mall, including, what was called, the Mother of All Rallies, which described itself as a pro-Trump freedom and unity rally. About a dozen or so Black Lives Matter activists showed up at the rally to protest. They stood in the back of the crowd

² “Five Habits of the Heart that Help Make Democracy Possible,” Center for Courage and Renewal, <http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Five-Habits-of-the-Heart.pdf>

with their fists in the air and chanted, “Black Lives Matter.” At first Tommy Gunn, the organizer of the rally, tried to draw the crowd’s attention away from the protestors and back onto the stage. But, then, he did something unexpected. He invited the Black Lives Matter activists to come up on stage. He told them and the crowd that their rally was about patriotism - freedom of speech and celebration - and so they were going to give them two minutes on stage to share their message.

Hawk Newsome, the president of Black Lives Matter New York, took the mic, and the first couple of things he shared received great applause. First, he said, “I am an American,” to which there were loud applause. He continued, “And the beauty of America is that when you see something broke in your country, you can mobilize to fix it.” Again, there were loud applause and cheering. The rest of his message didn’t get the same warm reception, and there was some disagreement and talking back from the crowd until the very end when he said, “If we are going to make America great again, we need to do it together.” And the crowd again erupted in applause. Afterwards, Newsome expressed hopefulness about the encounter and his interaction with some individuals in the crowd after he finished speaking. He said he didn’t think anyone’s position had changed dramatically. They still disagreed, but they were able to listen to one another - something he hadn’t thought was possible.

One of the bikers for Trump who was there for the event had this to say about it: “A couple of us had some interesting conversations with the BLM crew after the moment on the stage...they were shocked that we, as whites, faced many of the same issues they do. They really had no idea...they were truly surprised to hear that some of the things that happened to us are the same as what has happened to them. It was a start.”³

It is stories like these that are helping me right now to re-imagine what is possible in our civic life and also what is possible in our more private lives as well.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisNews/videos/1709220972442719/>

I find myself re-imagining that scene in the bathroom at Sears. I imagine the Sears matrons not shaking their hands but pausing with curiosity. I imagine the narrator's grandmother catching their stares in the mirror and pausing what she is doing to have her granddaughter explain why she needs to acrobatically wash her feet in a public bathroom. I imagine one of the Sears matrons holding out a hand for the older woman helping her down while another dries her pumps and hands them to her. I imagine.

I imagine, and I ask myself, How can I avoid tribalism and grow an appreciation of "otherness" in my own life? How can I become more aware of how someone else lives differently than I do?

On the most personal level, I believe that we can begin to heal our divides by recognizing one another's unique individuality and by offering one another a welcome that allows each of us to be known for who we are.

One final story. It is the story told by Wendell Berry in his novel Jayber Crow. Jayber Crow was raised in the fictitious town Port William, Kentucky. He lost his parents and was sent to an orphanage called The Good Shepherd when he was 10 years old. He describes what it was like to arrive at the Good Shepherd and the process of going from a "newboy" to just being J. Crow. He writes:

"Eventually I also was no longer new. I was J. Crow to my classmates, and they were names to me. We remembered each other from the past. But having been once a newboy myself, I remained aware of the other newboys and newgirls when they came in...I remember a little girl, the E. Lawler I mentioned before, who came to The Good Shepherd when she was about seven years old.

She was a slight, brown-haired, sad-looking, lonesome-looking girl whose clothes did not fit. She looked accidental or unexpected, and seemed to be without expectation,

and resigned, and so quiet that even in my selfishness I wished I knew of a way to help her.

I watched her all the time.

When her class went out to play, she did not take part but only stood back and watched the other girls...She was waiting.

I did not understand that she was waiting, but she was. And then one day as her classmates were joining hands to play some sort of game, one of the girls broke the circle.

She held out her hand to the newcomer to beckon her in. And E. Lawler ran into the circle and joined hands with the others.

I wrote E. Lawler in my tablet so that I would not forget her.”

My hope and my prayer is that we will not forget one another.

That we will remember that we all yearn to be part of the whole.

That with mercy and compassion we can continue to call one another into the circle of love and light.

So may it be.