

Us and Them: A Question of Heart

It was suggested to me last Thursday that perhaps I should introduce my other self before launching into today's message. For there are people here who may not know: I lead two lives. I've been the choir director and then Director of Music here at Evergreen for the past ten years.

I'm also an ordained minister, practicing Interfaith. I've been an Associate Minister at the Interfaith Community Church in Seattle for the past three years, and share the pulpit with three other ministers, all of differing faiths. I'm their Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, Interfaith minister. I was reminded last night at an interfaith event by a Muslim friend, that I'm the only Jewish Reverend he's ever heard of! Be that as it may, I'll be leaving both Evergreen and the Interfaith Community Church in June to lead full time the Living Interfaith Church of Snohomish County. There are now an entire two Interfaith churches in the state of Washington. Now you know me.

Our service began today with the choir giving voice to a common aspiration. We would be one. We would be one. And yet, much too often, we are not.

Our hymn, "Wake, Now My Senses," called upon us to "feel the deep power of being in all." And yet, much too often, we haven't.

Our responsive reading concluded, noting, "How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us." Strange and foolish they may be, yet they divide us still. We are, in fact, endlessly ingenious in slicing and dicing ourselves into smaller and smaller groups of us and them.

Rich and poor. Young and older. Men and women. Canadian and American. North American and African. And we've barely scratched the surface. American? Alabamian or Washingtonian? Big difference! Washingtonian? East of the mountains or west of the mountains? Big difference!

Us and them. Us and them.

And of course, nowhere is this more pronounced than in our spiritual communities. Christian or Jew? Muslim or Hindu? Buddhist or Baha'i? Theist or Atheist? Decide. Are you one of us? Or one of them?

We've been practicing our spiritual paths in isolation from each other for thousands of years. Yet, in the words of that eminent philosopher ... Dr. Phil ... "How's it working for you?" Four thousand years after the beginnings of the Hindu faith, three thousand years after Moses, twenty-five hundred years after Confucius and the Buddha, two thousand years after Jesus,

fifteen hundred years after Muhammad, and two hundred years after Humanism was formally named, though it can trace its roots back more than two thousand years to ancient Greece, and this is to name but a few of our traditions – all this time, and we still haven't learned something so simple as how to love our neighbor as ourselves. Instead, we cling to our walls of separation.

Us and them. Us and them. But there is no them. There is no them. There is only us.

It's hard in our politically charged atmosphere to miss the ferocity of us and them. The disdain with which the right holds the left, and the disdain with which the left holds the right. Us and them. But there is no them. There is only us.

And the truth of it is that many, perhaps most of us understand that and believe it ... here (our heads). It's easy, or at least, much easier, to espouse it, to believe it, hey, even to preach it than it is to put it in our hearts and live it.

And I'm a walking example. Just the other night. I was having dinner with friends. Politics came up, such a surprise!

A particular commentator was referenced. If you know me well enough, you may be able to guess who, but that's not the point. I immediately launched into a diatribe about "them." But then I caught myself. Because there is no them. There is no them. There is only us.

Not that families don't have their knock-down, drag-outs. Mine certainly did. And perhaps yours. But at the end of the day, we're all family. All of us. Even "those people;" whoever "those people" happen to be.

Dr. King, in that wonderful book from which Mike Mallory shared a reading, makes this startling observation. "Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools." He goes on to add, "The question now is, do we have the morality and courage required to live together as brothers and not be afraid?"

He asked that question over forty years ago. And, as Mike shared with us, Dr. King believed, as do I, that there's not an unlimited amount of time to come up with an answer.

One last quotation, I think quite profound, from this book that Dr. King wrote just months before he was assassinated, a book that was published posthumously.

"From time immemorial men have lived by the principle that 'self-preservation is the first law of life.' But this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. ... The universe is so structured that things go awry if men are not diligent in their

cultivation of the other-regarding dimension. ‘I’ cannot reach fulfillment without ‘thou’.” So wrote Dr. King. Which brings us to our anthem.

“You Raise Me Up.” “You raise me up so I can stand on mountains. You raise me up to walk on stormy seas. I am strong ... when I am on your shoulders. You raise me up to more than I can be.” But, of course, if you’re always raising me up, we’ve missed the point. We must raise each other up. Or, as Dr. King put it, “‘I’ cannot reach fulfillment without ‘thou’.”

There is no them. There is only us. But it’s hard to get away from our past.

Just a month ago, Andre Bauer, a candidate for governor of South Carolina, was referring to people on such government assistance as food stamps, when he said:

“My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You’re facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don’t think too much further than that. And so what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to curtail that type of behavior. They don’t know any better.”

He later apologized for the wording but not the sentiment of the statement. The poor, to Mr. Bauer, are akin to stray animals. If you feed “them,” you just encourage them to breed. “Them.”

A few days later, there was an excellent op-ed piece written by Leonard Pitts. Mr. Pitts posits, correctly I think, that if Mr. Bauer had written about Jews or African Americans, or women in such a way it would have become a national scandal. But, as Mr. Pitts writes, Bauer “said it of the poor, so he got away with it.”

But I think even Mr. Pitts misses a crucial point. For Mr. Pitts too considers people who live in poverty as “them” He thinks kindly of the poor, yet they remain “them.”

But there is no “them.” There is no them. There is only “us.” Some of us live in wealth, and some of us live in poverty, and most of us live somewhere in between. But it’s all us.

The poor are a part of “us.” As such we should be speaking out and looking out for all of us. We need to speak out strongly, because some of us don’t have decent health care; some of us are homeless; some of us are going hungry. Not “them.” “Us.”

I’d ask that we do something a little unusual. Let us, if we will, take a few moments for reflection, closing our eyes if we feel like it, to consider: when, in our own lives, have we been made to feel like one of “them?” And who have we treated that way?

We may want to continue this at home, or perhaps during the social hour.

Meanwhile, a true confession. One of my favorite movies is “To Sir, With Love.” I check Amazon every few months, to see if the DVD is at last available again. I checked a few weeks ago. It still wasn’t. But feeling in a “To Sir, With Love” mood, I went to YouTube to see if I could at least hear Lulu sing the title song. And someone had posted not only the opening credits, with the first verses, but also the last verse, which is sung at the end of the movie. It brought tears to my eyes.

Thinking it was nostalgia, I waited a day and then went back to listen again. And again, the tears welled up and then flowed freely. At this point I thought it was worth some pondering.

I realize that for me, a large part of the emotion comes from the whole idea of the movie – kids that society has given up on, and who indeed have given up on themselves, that this one stubborn teacher won’t, and the effect this has on their lives.

I realize that what made my heart ache, as I read Dr. King’s book, is how completely he was committed to “us.” And the same applies in “To Sir, With Love.” The teacher reaches the students when he stops treating the students as “them.”

Jesus dreamed of it. Hillel dreamed of it. Socrates dreamed of it, Muhammad dreamed of it. Gandhi dreamed of it. King dreamed of it. So when do we take it down from the clouds of dreaming and make it real? That’s what Dr. King was pondering in the book he wrote but did not live to see published. He left the answer to us.

I’d like to close by remembering a wonderfully uplifting thing that happened just over a month ago. This past February 11th marked the 20th anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s walk to freedom through the gates of Victor Verster prison. He’d spend twenty-seven years in unjust confinement. At last, he walked free.

It is a reminder to those of us who are overly pessimistic, that change can happen, that the grit and honor and example of one person can truly make a difference – and indeed can change the world.

It is a reminder also to those of us who are overly optimistic, that real change comes at a huge price, and demands immense sacrifice and suffering. As Dr. King asked, “Do we have the morality and courage required to live together as brothers and not be afraid?” It will take both morality and courage.

It is, as I feel certain Mr. Mandela would tell us, a matter not of head, but of heart. A matter not of philosophy, but of love.

Our final hymn is a familiar hymn. But before we sing it, before we even reach for our hymnals, let us listen to the words.

“Love will guide us,
Peace has tried us,
Hope inside us will lead the way;
On the road
From greed to giving.
Love will guide us
Through the hard night.”

There is no them. There is no them. And love will guide us.

And, as Rabbi Hillel put it so long ago, “If not now, when?”

May it be so.