

FEBRUARY'S THEME: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF RECONCILIATION?

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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

~ inspired by Rhys Williams

May this be a place where we come to break down barriers; to widen horizons; to become less judgmental.

May we here see the larger picture and the kinder conclusion; to love and let live; to embrace and forgive; to sustain and care.

May this be a time and place for us to reach out to our better selves, that we may love more and hate less, care more and reject less;

So that, bound together by understanding, we learn to sustain each other through trial and tribulation, through joy and happiness, through sickness and health.

Come into this place, that we may be joined in a common purpose of hope and fulfillment, that we may be renewed and revived.

Come into this place...where there exists a common, holy ground for one and all.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Marmalade ~ Orlanda R. Brugnola

(A bully makes fun of a new boy at school, but when the boy finds and returns the bully's lost cat, things change.)

READING

I Will Lift Up My Voice

~ Robert T. Weston

I will lift up my voice and sing;
Whatever may befall me,
I will still follow the light which kindles song.

I will listen to the music
Arising out of grief and joy alike,
I will not deny my voice to the song.

For in the depth of winter, song,
Like a bud peeping through the dry crust of earth,
Brings back memory,
And creates anew the hope and anticipation of spring;
Out of a world that seems barren of hope,
Song decries beauty in the shapes of leafless trees,
Lifts our eyes to distant mountain peaks which,
Even if we see them not,
Remind us that they are there, waiting,
And still calling to us to come up higher.

Out of the destruction of dear hopes,
Out of the agony of heartbreak,
Song rises once more to whisper to us
That even this is but the stage setting for a new beginning,
And that we shall yet take the pieces of our hearts
And put them together in a pattern
Of deeper, truer lights and shades.

I will lift up my voice in song,
For in singing I myself am renewed,
And the darkness of night is touched
By the promise of a new dawn,
For light shall come again.

MESSAGE *Being People of Reconciliation* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

What comes to mind when you think of reconciliation?

Ay, yai, yai...there are so many possibilities! Of course, in these times in this country, reconciliation is perhaps first, and most strongly, associated with the work of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The spirit of that process of reconciliation is about facing the truth of harm done, seeking healing, and looking for ways to move forward in better relationship between Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. That's what the workshop next Sunday is about, and I hope you'll all be there. AND, we'll be looking at this more specifically two weeks from today.

But other than that...which would be a good subtitle for today...other than THAT kind of reconciliation, necessary to heal damage done, what meaning does reconciliation have in our lives?

We can reconcile our bank statements, and we can reconcile ourselves to some less-than-desired reality. We can acknowledge irreconcilable differences between us, when we agree that we're simply going to disagree. We can attempt to reconcile our dreams with what is...our champagne taste with our beer budget.

Understandably, we tend to resist reconciliation. It can feel like compromising when we don't want to compromise, or sacrificing what we are not willing to sacrifice. Dictionary definitions of reconciliation say that it is about making one view or belief compatible with another, or about becoming resigned to something that's not desirable. So, to reconcile surely can imply that we have to give up something that is important to us, or give in to something that is not our preferred way.

But, another definition says that it is "the process of finding a way to make two different ideas or facts exist or be true at the same time." At the same time. Not one or the other. Both. And

so, germane to our theme for the month...being PEOPLE of reconciliation, in our lives and our relationships...today we're looking at what is involved in the balancing act of reconciliation....that is, recognizing that our lives together are not either/or.

When I was in seminary, I had a classmate, Peggy Green¹, who was passionate about reconciliation between the Christian community and the GLBTQ community. In the campus chapel, which sat just above my apartment windows, she gathered a group for dialogue. She describes the group in a book written after this experience:

“Gay and straight, Left and Right, we come from churches with blood-letting differences about the Bible and how to use it, about the human heart and how to handle it. We range in age from 29 to 62 (there are 8 of us;) we are 5 women and 3 men; we are 2 Asians and 6 Caucasians; we are 3 gay people and 3 evangelicals. We are a lip-biting, hair-twirling, nose-diddling bunch of adversaries, but we are sitting face to face.”

These people were probably never going to agree on the issues. But still, they were willing to come together, face to face, to listen and seek to understand.

While never privy to those conversations, I was aware that they were happening, and I remember feeling that something ominous, almost earth-shaking was going on in that space...as if I should keep my eye on the building for fear of...what? I don't know. For fear that the earth would open up? For fear that someone was going to get hurt? For fear that there might actually BE some understanding developing across differences we often prefer to accentuate?

This kind of dialogue intrigues me. I am drawn to it, even as I know I am quite terrible at it. Truly, I suck at it. But I'm drawn to it because in an increasingly pluralistic society, it is easy to fall into entrenched encampments of ideologies and lifestyles. And I believe there is salvation to be had in understanding. And I believe that dialogue committed to peaceful co-existence...dialogue in which we are willing to recognize the dignity of the other...holds the key to understanding...AND better relationships.

Krista Tippett, of the American Public Media show “On Being”, hosts something called *The Civil Conversations Project*², a public forum which, through podcast and live events, provides ideas and tools for healing what she calls ‘our fractured civic spaces.’ She brings together people on opposite sides of issues such as marriage, abortion, politics, and race. The project asks, “How do we speak the questions we don't know how to ask each other? Can we find ways to bridge gulfs between us about politics, morality, and life itself? Can we do that even while we continue to disagree, passionately?” The idea is to model a new kind of conversation and a re-imagined relationship with difference.

¹ www.peggygreen.net “Coming Out, Coming to Faith, Coming to the Table: Stories We Told Across Enemy Lines”

² <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/>

I have listened to many of these podcasts with admiration, AND I realize that the participants are rare indeed, because first they had to be willing to enter this kind of conversation...a conversation which required each to come, and remain, no matter what, in ongoing mutual respect.

It seems to me that the 'old' kind of conversation is one which pits us against one another. We have been trained in debate, we swim in waters of black and white/right and wrong thinking, we are more comfortable with polemics than the in-between, AND many of us simply feel more at home in homogenous places and spaces. I mean, how often do we talk about being drawn here, into this community of 'like minds'?

I too like being with people who agree with me. I like being able to talk openly in regards to my political and social views without being challenged. I like working in groups where there is a simpatico about the direction and style of the project...when we're all on the same page...because it makes things go more smoothly and quickly. I appreciate the need to share with people who have had similar experiences, or who struggle with similar challenges, because to do so offers affirmation and support.

But...

But, how equipped are we to deal with people and situations outside of our comfort zone? How able are we to work together with those who hold very different worldviews? What do we do when, even here in this community of like minds, opposing ideas and views come into conflict? How do we find balance, or reconciliation, when faced with that?

As I try to examine what happens in me when confronted the kind of difference that feels like conflict, I first have to acknowledge the many contexts in which this happens. For example, when spending time with my family...I know going in that we don't see eye to eye, and still, when our differences become apparent, I bristle. Is this because they are my family and the differences make me feel as though I don't belong? Is it because I feel that I'm not accepted for, or approved of, as the whole person I am? I feel vulnerable, and sense that I am under attack. Not a good foundation for reconciling with my family.

Then, there are the times when difference surprises me...when I think I'm with people 'like me' and some core disagreement arises. It's shocking, and I can feel frustration and even anger that this 'other' is not aligning themselves as I had expected...which is 'with me!' Once, in the midst of a playful argument, my friend Tom passionately responded to something I said with, "No, I agree with me!" We still laugh about that beautiful truism.

And then there are the times when differences seem to be irreconcilable...when how we see things or the way we think the work should get done or which process is best to use or which ideology is more correct...that these things divide us and make 'getting along' or 'moving forward' seem impossible. This is the most difficult I think. We feel the pain of a chasm between us even though we want to 'make nice;' we realize we are not meeting the

expectations of the other, nor they ours; we feel that one of us is going to 'win' somehow, and the other must lose. We become even more entrenched and territorial.

Too often, it seems, we take the 'easy' way out...doing almost anything rather than sticking with it. We walk out, we blame, we become self-righteous...and we break possible relationships rather than build them. How are we to be people of reconciliation?

Well, the context matters, or at least, being able to name and adjust to the context matters. The heart with which we enter the situation surely matters. And our ideas of what's most important matter. The question of whether process trumps outcome comes to the fore. Is the method the message? Can we let go of deadlines and expectations and just spend time trying to find some mutuality that will allow us to move on? This kind of sitting in process, face to face, or faces to faces, and taking the time necessary, for there to be agreement or shared direction, is quite contrary to western ways of thinking, and can be extremely difficult when we are focused on getting the task at hand done.

No matter what, the work of reconciliation is not easy. It doesn't come naturally to most of us. But when I have a sincere intention to understand, it's easier to enter into the spirit of reconciliation, being open to learning about another's truth. To allow our differences to co-exist side by side, requires listening, not talking...offering attention, not opinions. It requires curiosity, not judgment. It seeks a spirit of peace, not competition. It means setting aside our personal agendas and being open to change.

I have a colleague who says that ministry continually opens him to the reality that the answer is usually both/and. This is so much the journey of this faith...to state clearly what is important to us...where we stand...and at the same time, to be open to new truth and understanding. To be firm and confident, and at the same time vulnerable and curious. To be well-reasoned and informed, and at the same time, not to be too sure that we have the answers. Parker Palmer calls this chutzpah and humility.³ Chutzpah, in knowing that we each have a voice that has a right to speak and needs to be heard. Humility, in accepting the fact that our truth is always partial – and may not be true at all – and therefore listening with openness and respect, especially to "the other."

You know, acceptance is a core value in our religious tradition. To accept another is to know them and not to try to change them. To embrace another is to celebrate who they are even when we don't agree. Maybe a clue to honest acceptance lies in being open to the possibility that we will actually learn and be improved by our interaction with difference. Encounters with 'strangers' inevitably take us to places of tension where we don't want to be. But if we

³ <http://chronicle.com/article/Humility-Chutzpahthe/124129/>

can hold those tensions creatively, they can expand our hearts, and open us to new understandings of ourselves and our world.⁴

To be people of reconciliation is to realize that whatever our agenda, relationship comes first. To be people of reconciliation is to listen to others, to speak our own truths, and to find the common good in the value of the relationship itself.

Can we be people of reconciliation? Maybe. If I'm willing to hear your truth without judgment or criticism, and you're willing to hear mine. Maybe. If I'm willing to be changed by your reality, and you're willing to be changed by mine. Maybe. Maybe if we can reconcile ourselves to the reality that we are dependent on, and accountable to one another...that each of us holds only a piece of the truth, and that together, we are whole. There is so much to be gained.

So be it. Amen.

READING *Let Us Learn Peace* ~ Annie Foerster

Peace is more than the absence of worry.
It is the creation of safe havens for all;
It is the building of security for everyone;
It is the forgiveness of self, as well as one who would harm you.

Let us seek contentment; let us learn peace.
Peace is more than the absence of discordance.

It is the intent listening to diverse points of view;
It is the intentional speaking of all voices,
one at a time;
It is the tension within silence that welcomes
all thoughts.

Let us seek harmony; let us learn peace.
Peace is more than the absence of tension.

It is studying the hard lesson of letting go;
It is breathing through pain into tranquility;
It is forming friendship out of enmity.

⁴ http://www.onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-chutzpah-and-humility-five-habits-of-the-heart-for-democracy-in-america/8396?utm_source=On+Being+Newsletter&utm_campaign=121cfe1061-20160206_jean-berko-gleason_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1c66543c2f-121cfe1061-66356993&mc_cid=121cfe1061&mc_eid=7abda1f9fe

Let us seek serenity; let us learn peace.
Peace is much more than the absence of war.

It is observing the promised truce when anger would say, “no”;
It is finding the just compromise when the ego would
say, “my way”;
It is striving for reconciliation when the heart would say, “revenge.”

Let us seek amity for all the earth; let us learn peace.

CLOSING WORDS

~ inspired by Christina Baldwin⁵

As long as we share our stories, as long as our stories reveal our strengths and vulnerabilities to each other, we reinvigorate our understanding and grow our tolerance differences that in other circumstances would drive us apart. When we know each other's true stories, we can lean in and love each other into wholeness.

Let us practice this kind of compassion, a compassion that lets us forget our place, a compassion that, when challenged by woundings, helps us remember our way back into alignment with ourselves.

When confronted with thoughtlessness or cruelty, let us take a risk, and rather than lashing back, respond in such a way as to create the possibility of reconnection. May we live into the possibility of reconciliation.

Amen. Blessed be.

⁵ ~ Christina Baldwin, *a Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*