

## *Healing the Heart of Our Democracy (Part 1)*

### Isaiah 42:1-9

My mother had a birthday this week. I called to tell her ‘Happy Birthday’ as I was driving to work. After she made me *sing* Happy Birthday (because a mother never stops hoping she can instill non-existent talents in her children), we kept talking. I should say first that I have a lovely relationship with my mom. We talk easily and often, about just about anything. On this day our conversation wandered into politics, as it often does these days...as many of my conversations do these days. And within a few minutes, we had each gone to our familiar—and distant—corners. We both feel a lot of worry and a little bit of hope, but the things we feel worried and hopeful about are different. I could hear my voice rising, too insistent, too sure. As I got off the phone, I thought, “Darn it. I did it again.” How did I let myself argue with my well-intentioned, intelligent, thoughtful, kind mother again—on her birthday?! Don’t I preach and send out Midweek Messages practically every week about the importance of listening to and understanding each other without judgment or anger? Haven’t I said to myself a dozen times that I’m going to listen to other people’s opinions without trying to change them?

I think one of the things that has been disorienting and upsetting about our country during and after the last election is that we’ve been surprised by the level of disagreement and misunderstanding we have with people who we thought were like us. We’re prepared to recognize and even appreciate some kinds of diversity—differences of age and race, sexual orientation, ethnicity. We talk almost every week in this church about how important it is to work at being a community that includes everyone, regardless of those differences.

But such dramatic differences in the way we think, and see the world—among Americans? People who grew up in the same community and even the same family? That’s harder. Harder to understand and harder to accept gracefully. I can work hard at identifying with the plight of Syrian refugees and children in Afghanistan, but people who insist that their candidate’s lies are less serious than the ones I can dismiss from my candidate? The goodwill runs right out of me.

I hit what has been called recently an “empathy wall”. An invisible but rock-solid structure that keeps me from connecting with, or understanding, or even *seeing* the person on the other side of it. I can’t see good intention in their position; I see only anger and hatefulness, what looks to me like stubborn resistance to an obvious truth.

It’s frightening, this inability find, and to be able to rest in, a common humanity. It signals danger for the future of our country, our ability to work together for a common good. It drives us toward an uneasy silence at holiday dinners with family members and in phone calls and email exchanges with old friends. It makes us nervous when the pastor brings it up in church. If peace is the absence of conflict, wouldn’t it be more helpful *not* to talk about the things that remind us of our differences?

Silence might our best strategy if a cease-fire is the best we can hope for. If ‘getting along’ is a good enough goal, then not talking about things we disagree about—politics *or* religion—might be the right action. But I know that what God hopes for us—needs from us—is something more than just getting along. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it the Beloved Community.

Martin Luther King wasn’t the first person use the phrase ‘beloved community,’ but he helped us see what it looks like. It was the vision that compelled his preaching and his life, a passion to make our life

together as Americans a parable—a real life story—of God’s love for the world. A *beloved community*. Beloved community happens when people come together with their differences—in race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, even political belief—and recognize that we are all connected; that my wholeness and well-being depends on your well-being, on the wellness of *every* other person in our society. It’s like music with harmony. Each voice brings something different, something necessary.

That’s not the same as burying our disagreements and deciding we’re not going to talk about the ways we’re different. If we’re going to create the Beloved Community we cannot retreat into silence. Harmony requires every voice to be heard.

The stories of Jesus remind us that our responsibility as Christians is to stay engaged, to work toward a vision of Beloved Community in every way we can. This is the ‘transformation of the world’ that Jesus and the mission statement of the United Methodist Church have called us to. It requires us to live publicly, even to vote, with the same values—of love and generosity and compassion—that we want our spiritual lives. But Beloved Community isn’t achieved by an election or even the best government. It’s heart work. It has to happen inside of every one us...and between us, in our conversations, the ways we speak and the ways we listen to one another.

The Quaker educator Parker Palmer tells a story about a visit he made years ago to Americus, Georgia, the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity. Habitat grew out of a non-profit in Americus called Koinonia Farm, which has been working for years to help people in that region with jobs and housing. On the Sunday he was there Palmer went to church at a small black church, made up of a few people who were eking out a living by working on other people’s farms. Their living conditions are probably not too far from the conditions of slavery that held their great grandparents. He attended the adult Sunday school class before worship. Only three people were in the class, but they ran the class as they did every week—by Robert’s Rules of Order. One member of the class served as the presider, another as recording clerk, the other as sergeant at arms.

Palmer was confused. After church, he asked the pastor why they ran the Sunday school class so formally. Why couldn’t they just sit and talk to each other? “You don’t understand,” the pastor said. “These are people who have been shut out of the political process for years—centuries—before civil rights were passed in the 1960’s. Now they can participate legally, but being heard by the people in power is not easy. We want them to know what it’s like to participate in a formal debate so that they won’t feel intimidated. They’re practicing citizenship, learning how to listen well, to speak clearly, to follow the rules of American politics, so that they will feel confident about their ability to be full participants.” I’m humbled by that story, by people who take their citizenship so seriously that they practice it every week.

Any citizen of the United States who’s over 18 can vote. Everyone in this country is invited into the political conversation. But maybe something more is required of us. Of us who have seen for ourselves the ways God lays himself down for love of this world—our *belovedness*. We are called to bring something more to the conversation. Maybe the skills of living as the beloved community take practice.

Parker Palmer has suggested some ‘habits of the heart’ that we must *practice* if we are going to be citizens who are mending the heart of our communities.

First, we have to understand that we are all in this together. Every discipline— science, economics, philosophy, religion—reminds us that we are all connected to one another. We need each other. That

includes strangers, people we know from heartbreaking news stories. But it also includes the neighbor who goes to rallies for ideas that we find offensive.

Second, we have to develop not only a tolerance, but an appreciation of ‘otherness’; a sense that our country and our conversation is made *better* by different points of view. Our lives are made richer by getting outside our own tribe. So practice inviting ‘otherness’ into your life. However you do it: stop limiting your Facebook feed, or talking only with friends who see the world the same way you do. Pay attention to the feelings underneath the comments that offend you. Turn on Fox News or MSNBC not to spy on the enemy, but to try to understand what makes sense to other intelligent, educated people. Notice the people around you when you’re at the airport or a shopping mall, how people who you don’t get at all love their children too. Talk to them, even if it’s just exchanging hello’s.

Third, Parker Palmer says, we have to find a life-giving, positive way to hold tension, the conflicts we cannot resolve. Many things will happen that we think are plain wrong. We are imperfect and broken people who live in an imperfect and broken world. Life, and government, and people in charge will be filled with contradictions and disappointments and what look to us like terrible decisions. It can break your heart. It should break your heart. But we can choose our response. When your heart breaks, it can fly apart into shards of anger and cynicism. But disappointment can also break your heart *open*, and deepen your resolve to be part of goodness and reconciliation.

Finally, we have to find our own voices, and get clear about speaking what we believe. This takes particular practice. In politics, we tend to see ourselves as members of the audience rather than actors in a play that is still going on. Politics feels like a spectator sport, where we cheer for one side or the other, cast our vote for a winner or a loser. But living peacefully and constructively in a community where there’s disagreement requires each of us to be able to say something more than what’s wrong with the other side. What do *you* believe? What do you think is most important in our life together? Your voice is important. The community will not be whole without it. Using your voice well—speaking clearly and positively—takes practice.

*You are my chosen*, God says to us in today’s reading from Isaiah. *I’ve put my spirit in you, so that you can bring justice and light to the place where you live. I am calling you to this work: to be a promise to the people, a light that darkness can’t put out. I am giving to you the work of opening eyes and setting people free. This is my vision, my hope for the world I love and will not give up on. I need you to help me make it happen.*

Especially in this inauguration week, let us remember that we have been called out into this extraordinary role. No matter how you feel about this moment in our nation’s life—whether the results of this last election make you feel like we are finally back on track or whether you are scared to death—this is the moment to raise your head and take your place—not only in America, but in God’s beloved community. Let us be citizens who are resolved to live and practice hope and a stubborn love for one another, no matter what.

Sources:

Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*

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Brenda Salter MacNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*