

Who is at the Table?

Sermon at First Parish, February 11, 2018

The Messy Truth

First of all, I want to encourage you to talk back to me during this message. If you agree with something or something resonates with you, please feel free to let me know in the moment. I realize that some people might be uncomfortable or distracted with that kind of participation, both doing it or hearing it, but I also realize that some people have been literally bursting with the desire to do this during some of our services. Today, I would ask that those who are uncomfortable try to go with this today. It's an experiment, it's a learning opportunity...we need to do these things sometimes in order to grow. I mostly want to encourage the kids in the room to do so, because this message is for you all...which means that you all need to listen as well. I'm still going to try to talk to everyone, but the message is one that I really want the kids in the room to hear and think about, so I'm going to try to keep this fairly brief. You see, Mandy and I got a lesson this week that everyone needs to hear so that when you are in the same situation you can make different and better choices. That's my hope anyhow.

Have you ever just messed something up? I mean like totally getting something wrong? Come on kids, how many of you have messed something up at some point? Okay, so clearly this is something that is pretty common. I've personally messed up so many things, that I don't have time in a thousand sermons to talk about them all. But let me ask, have you ever messed up by breaking something? I've done that too. Again, plenty of times, but the most memorable thing I ever broke was when my brother and I were playing catch with a pillow in the dining room when I was about 7 and my brother was 10...because that's what 7 and 10 year olds do right? Never thinking that something might break because we were having fun. But then it happened, I lobbed the pillow directly into one of my mother's crystal punch bowls that had been a wedding present. I watched it tip over and very completely shatter on the floor. That moment of coming from a feeling of real happiness, to a moment of total horror followed by complete embarrassment has never left me. If you've broken something and felt all of that let me hear it.

This week I broke something a bit different. I broke a promise. I promised to myself and I promised to you to always work from a place of authenticity. When I sat down with Mandy at the beginning of this week to create a multi-generational service that spoke to Access and Inclusion specifically for people with disabilities, we came up with what we thought was a great idea to use a story that symbolized marginalization and what it could look like to empower someone to be true to themselves. But in our excitement, we missed the most important part of any message about

inclusion...actually including people with disabilities in the decision making about the service.

With generous encouragement from someone with a personal stake in this conversation, both Mandy and I were able to understand that we had done the very thing that we were talking about *not* doing. We also were made aware that part of our mistake came from not recognizing how talking *around* disability (using metaphors, or extended symbolism) is an able-ist action in itself. Although they are very different kinds of hurt, this last part reminded me of the times when someone has spoken about or around what it means to be black in an effort to seem more embracing of diversity, but in the end just making me completely invisible in the process. It didn't work.

So what do we do? How do you make something like this better?

An Apology:

So kids, what is the best way to try to make something better when you've hurt someone or broken something? Any ideas? One of the most immediate ways to make something better when you've broken a promise or messed something up is to admit it and apologize. So, I would like to offer an apology to those in the community with disabilities who have felt unheard, unrecognized or not taken seriously, whether during my short time here so far or in the past. I offer that apology on behalf of Mandy and on behalf of those of us who do not face those challenges and who have either unwittingly or uncaringly continued the hurt and the marginalization. I am sorry.

It is particularly difficult to apologize, though, when we have an elevator that is still not functioning after 6 weeks. Although I can say we are much closer to having this problem solved thanks to Carol staying on the case, and I can tell you that the missing part is actually in the process of being manufactured and we expect it to be delivered within the next week. Installation of that part will still take maybe another week after that. Just the same, we shouldn't be in this situation. Our contractor for this work has not been responsive in the way that we had hoped and we are re-evaluating that relationship moving forward.

Here's another question for you. If an apology is given, but then someone does the exact same thing again and again, does that apology mean very much? Yeah, as far as I'm concerned it's a bit worthless and empty. This is one reason we as UUs look to be in covenant.

Last week I spoke about how covenants can keep us as Unitarian Universalists in right relationship with one another. I have entered into a covenant with you all as your minister, but I only have so much say in all of this. Being the minister is nice, but the strength of this gathering is all about you as a community. The most powerful covenant is the one that we say every Sunday to affirm ourselves as a community:

(kids and parents)
In covenant with one another
And all we hold sacred,
We answer the call of love
Welcoming all people
Into the celebration of life
Searching for truth and meaning,
And striving for justice and compassion,
To nourish and serve each other,
Our community and our world.

I think many affirm a commitment to inclusion in our covenant in lines like “welcoming all people” or maybe “striving for justice and compassion”. But how does that work? Isn’t that a little vague? Do we actually know what “all people” looks or sounds like? And just how are we defining someone else’s idea of justice? Why can’t we name the specific value of people with specific disabilities in our community? It is a tremendous assumption to make that when someone who presents differently than you’ve seen before, or has a different speech pattern or thought process or way of moving...that when they literally show up on your doorstep, you won’t find a way to make an excuse for turning them out or completely ignoring them. It is more difficult than most of us realize.

“Welcoming all people”... “striving for justice and compassion”...another thing to consider is that focusing on doing the welcoming and striving, may also put some of us in the role of being the only ones who *open* the doors? Or worse as the *gatekeepers of justice and compassion*. That is the very definition of ableism.

I am not saying that welcoming all people and striving for justice and compassion is a bad thing. On the contrary, its great, but for me it doesn’t work unless we activate the other parts of the covenant like the “celebration of life” and finding ways to “nourish and serve each other”. This is what calls on us to recognize the full range of each other’s being. Yes it may feel like more work, but the benefits to all of us far outweigh the effort. What would it mean to put our assumptions about convenience and expense after the needs of others and begin by showing up with joy and affirmation for everyone?

There’s another line in the covenant that I think is pretty important for real inclusion. It’s the one that speaks of “all we hold sacred.” Everyone in this room has a different concept of what I will call “sacred” ...others might call spiritual, or Godly or divine or maybe just precious and dear. Regardless of the word we use, this is where our covenant begins, with how we hold each other in our hearts. This incredible intimacy of

relationship means that we aren't called to make "accommodations" for people with disabilities, it means that from the very beginning, we build in the tools that are flexible and agile enough to allow all of us to thrive in our lives together in community.

Welcome at the Table

About now, you're probably wondering why I titled this message "Who is at the table?" I must admit that when I started putting this together I had a slightly different idea. I have often used the metaphor of "being at the table" to describe the process of including all stakeholders in the decision process. But as I've been deeply reflecting this week, I've begun to rethink this.

I'm going to make an assumption that somewhere out there there are still families that sit down to dinner together. Does anyone do that? My own family growing up rarely did this or only did it on special occasions, but one of the things I remember from when I saw this at my friends' houses was that it wasn't only mom doing all the work (although it being the 70's things were still pretty backward). Everyone had a job, kids set the table, dad served or carved, etc. In the end clearing up and washing dishes was also a group effort. Being "at the table" wasn't about being invited simply to sit down and enjoy the meal. Being at the table was about having a stake (pun intended) in the meal. So kids, remember that a meal with your family is a shared experience with a shared outcome...everyone gets fed and everyone creates the community of the meal. Be sure to do your part.

Shouldn't *this* be the kind of table we want to talk about?

There's another perspective on this expression of "being at the table" that may be useful. I've been doing bit of research on the song "I'm gonna sit at the welcome table" which we will sing at the end of service. The spirit with which UUs tend to sing this song is one of joy and acceptance. We also frame it in our Tapestry of Faith curriculum in terms of the Mullah Nasrudin Islamic folk tale where Nasrudin ends up feeding his coat because it seems that the beautiful coat was more welcome at the table than he was when he was dressed in work clothes. But we can't forget that this song was also used during the Civil Rights Movement. Freedom Riders would sing this song and multiple variations on the lyrics while they sat in at segregated lunch counters. (sing) That changes things a bit. This framing reflected the slave origins of the lyrics that speak of being able to sit at the forbidden table and also spoke of the judgement that slave masters would face in the afterlife. Some of the original versions of the lyric are literally about turning the tables on injustice. It is a table of defiance against oppression. When we sing the song today, try holding THAT feeling in your heart.

I am convinced that we need to be cultivating both of these tables when we explore our relationship with people with disabilities. We must look for the authentic and specific

contributions that everyone can bring and in doing so, we set our table as an act of defiance against a status quo that pushes people with disabilities away from the table and even out of the room. Because of our covenant, the act of “welcoming” cannot be a simplistic, easy breezy, “let’s all have brunch” kind of welcome. It must be the welcome that is for the whole self...for all of us...and it takes work.

So, I said before that an apology is only as good as the next time a hurt happens. I want to hold myself and hold this community to that. Mandy and I and the whole staff recognizes that we are still very much in a learning, and growing phase. Settling into a new rhythm with a new minister, understanding some new structures as to how we can work together as well. But what we also recognize is that the work of active inclusion of people with disabilities and differing abilities of all kinds must be done at all times, it is not an option. To that end, we are seeking members of this community who are willing to be the authentic voices around accessibility and inclusion. We not only want your involvement, but we need it to do this right. What we would like to do is bring together a covenanted group to advise and guide the congregation and learn the best way to move forward living into the covenant that we say every Sunday. It may take a little bit of time, but I hope you agree that if we don’t do it right, we might as well not do it at all.

We are going to continue to make mistakes. Someone is going to toss a pillow at the punch bowl and it is going to break. And your leadership team is going to have even more brilliant yet equally totally insensitive ideas. But the beauty of what we already have is that there are ways for us to call one another back into covenant. We have ways to recognize when we have done wrong and to actually receive that message from one another. As long as we continue to bring these clarifications to one another from the position of love, as long as we remember to hold each other as sacred, to celebrate one another and to strive to nourish and serve one another, we can make this right. And if you are concerned about our capacity to live fully into what we say we believe in regarding access and inclusion I would challenge you instead to understand that we can’t afford NOT to live fully into our commitment to access and inclusion. – May it be so.