

“Together and Different”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, January 31, 2021

Reading: “Soul Lifts” by Tess Baumberger.

Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul?

Then when your mother wanted to brag about you

she could show people the picture and say,

"That's my daughter, doesn't she have a beautiful soul,

all sparkly and many-colored and flowing all around her?"

Wouldn't it be great if we walked around

surrounded by our souls,

so that they were the first things people saw

instead of the last things?

Then people would judge us by who we really are

instead of how we look.

Imagine no more racism, ageism, sexism, fatism, shortism, homophobia.

Imagine falling in love with who a person is,

just by looking at them.

It would be a kind of cloaking device,

hiding physical faults, defects or even perfections.

I'd want it to be mandatory.

Then people would work at making their souls more attractive

instead of their bodies and faces.

Imagine people knowing by your soul that you really need a hug.

Imagine people helping each other and their souls changing colors or growing.

Imagine soul gyms

with exercises to get your sagging soul in shape.

Imagine the long lines forming for soul-lifts

at churches, temples, mosques, synagogues

or nature's grand cathedrals.

Imagine.

Sermon/Homily: “Together and Different”

On Sunday mornings the worship leaders for the day gather at about 9:30 on Zoom and we go through what I call the “pre-flight” check-list. We decide who is doing what for tech support, things like who is posting in the chat, recording, and streaming to YouTube. We each do a sound and visual check; we ask, “How is my lighting? Can you hear me OK? Any concerns?” Troy sound checks his mic and the piano. Sara checks her sound and the visuals she’ll use for the day--puppets or props or slides. (And we all check out which pair of glasses Sara has on that day!)

Over these months of online services, as we prepare for worship, I’ve noticed that I and others sometimes say things like, “I’m having a hard time hearing Curtis today. Is that just me?” or “I’m hearing a buzz in the background. Is that on my end?” Or “Sharon’s screen looks frozen to me. Anyone else see that?” We check to see if our experience of the world is the same as others. We’re asking: do we share the same reality?

In this virtual world, we’ve learned that our experience is shaped by the devices we use, the many kinds of screens that we have in our lives right now. I notice that, consciously or not, we’ve come to understand that what we see and hear and experience through our screens may be different from what others are seeing and hearing and experiencing through their screens.

Today’s topic of how to be together and different is in response to a question that Karen Jackson asked me. Karen was the winning bidder in last Summer’s auction for a sermon on a topic of our mutual interest. When Karen and I spoke last month to explore what was on her mind and in her heart, she mentioned how she had come to understand that there is a large number of people in this country who see things so differently from her. Little did we know at the time how much that difference would become even more apparent in the first week of this new year.

Karen's request was to explore how we can learn to live together on this shared planet when we are not the same and never will be. Her study of Native teaching tells her that we are not all wired the same and that we can't easily change how we are wired, if at all. Not only are people different, but what about all the plants and animals and other species that we share this planet with? She asked this big question: "How are we to be together when we are so different?"

Thank you, Karen, for asking this question. It has become even more pertinent and important in recent days and weeks. It is an important question for us as a faith community and for us as a nation. Whether and how we answer that question will determine our future. Will our answer be inclusive and just, or not? If we want to be together and different in ways that are inclusive and just, what will help us get there?

It won't surprise you to hear that as a spiritual leader that I'd suggest spiritual practices and I have three practices to offer today.

The first is the practice of awareness, not general awareness but the awareness of differences. Karen's awareness that there were some people whose reality was so different from hers caused her to ask this big, important question.

For those of us who are bridge builders and peacemakers, we may try to deny or minimize differences. Yes, we try to find common ground, and having common ground doesn't mean that we are the same. Yes, we are one—we each have the spark of divinity in us and we are connected in the infinite web—and being one does mean that we are the same.

Denying that we are different can even be harmful. It can sound like this: "I don't see color" or "Race doesn't matter" or "I don't think I have to pay attention to pronouns, it's not relevant to me." In order to bridge differences, we have to acknowledge that they even exist in the first place and name what they are.

This pandemic has offered us a window into significant differences between us. Many of us have heard this metaphor in the past year: we are in the same storm but we are not in the same boat. There are vast differences, and so many inequities, laid bare by this virus--who gets it, who gets medical care, what kind of care they get, and if they even survive. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities and many small businesses have been decimated by this virus. The rich have gotten much richer and big business has gotten much bigger.

I experience these vast differences within our faith community, large differences between generations, differences in economic means and security, differences in life experience. Some of us are retired with guaranteed income, perhaps enough, or more than enough, or not quite enough. Some of us are front line workers, donning masks and other PPE to be safe in our work. Some of us work remotely at home or elsewhere. Some of us lost our jobs and have been without work for months. Some of us changed jobs. Some of us are working and parenting children who are in school from home. Based on our health status and risk tolerance and a host of other factors, some of us have continued our activities with masks, while others of us haven't left our homes in months. We don't have a shared reality regarding the current state of things. And this will continue as some of us get vaccinated and some of us wait for vaccines for weeks and months.

Acknowledging differences means that we have to know who we are as individuals, we have to understand our identities and beliefs, values and circumstances so we can notice and identify who or what is different, not with judgement, just different. It sounds simple to say this out loud and yet it isn't easy in practice. At its worst, prematurely bridging differences can suggest that either you have to be like me or I have to be like you in order for us to be in relationship; that one of us has to give up who we are in order to be connected. Being who we truly are in the face of difference takes knowing who we are, then noticing and naming differences.

I can hear this noticing and naming as we prepare on Sunday morning: This is my reality, what I see and hear. What do you see and hear? Do we have a shared reality?

And, that leads to the second spiritual practice: be curious. Be curious about ourselves and about others. That's more big questions: Who am I? What do I believe? What are my core values? How did I come to those beliefs and values?

Who are you? What do you believe? What are your core values? How did you come to those beliefs and values? Once we realize that others may live in a reality different from ours, be curious about their reality. Be curious without judgement.

Curiosity doesn't always mean asking questions directly. It might include listening to stories, podcasts, poetry, history, autobiographies. It might mean checking out new information sources and media. It might mean getting proximate, as Bryan Stevenson says. For example, those of us who are white can learn about the experiences of BIPOC communities by showing up in multicultural spaces, places where people of color and white people gather. In those spaces those of us who are white can listen and observe: Who is welcomed and who is not? Who is talking and who is not? Who is comfortable and who is not? How am I in that space?

I believe these are some of the gifts and purposes of a faith community: to provide a place that supports us and holds us as we learn about ourselves-our beliefs and values, and a community that allows us to practice learning to be with others who are different.

I've seen this happen at OUUC. For example, I've had a couple of experiences hosting a breakout room where someone introduced themselves with their pronouns, and then shared that it was the first time they'd ever done so. They were brave enough to hear their call to be different and to give it a try. They survived the experience and maybe even learned something! I hope they were encouraged and tried it again and again.

Sikh activist and civil rights attorney Valerie Kaur calls this practice "See No Stranger."

Grounded in her faith, she suggests that, when we see or meet someone, especially someone who we perceive as different from us, we can say to ourselves, “You are a part of me I do not yet know.” (repeat) This may be a change in attitude and perspective for some of us, a shift from “different is a threat” to “different is an opportunity for learning.”

Part of being curious about differences is to notice how we respond to those who we perceive as different. It is uncomfortable and awkward to do something or meet someone new and unfamiliar. That’s why we practice. We can notice what and who we feel comfortable with, who unsettles us, troubles us, challenges us? We can ask, what is it about them that unnerves us, or rather what is it about us that they unnerve us?

And that leads to the third spiritual practice: being with discomfort and pain, our own and others. When we listen across differences we will hear pain. I’ve experienced this when, as a white person, I hear the life experience of those in BIPOC communities. When we are open enough to hear stories of those who are different, we can grieve with them, and in our listening, we can gather information about how to best act with them on their behalf.

Curiosity and being with discomfort is especially important when we listen to those whose beliefs and action oppose our own. What is the wound they are acting out of? Why do they feel the victim? What are they so afraid of?

Please hear that I am not condoning behavior that hurts others. For example, the attempted coup on January 6 was an attack on our democracy and people died. I am speaking about what was underneath the rage and fear. What wound is present in them and in our democracy? This is where it is important for white people to listen to white people. It was predominantly white men and women who participated in the attack on January 6 and who continue to support the destructive themes expressed on that day. We cannot ask people of color to listen to those stories; it is too dangerous and harmful to people of color. Those of us who are white can be safe enough to do that listening. It

may not be easy, but our listening and our anger can help us gather in community to reimagine what can be.

We must also learn how to be with our own discomfort. It is hard to try new things and sometimes we don't get it right. It is uncomfortable to be stretched and challenged. It is hard to witness the pain of others without rushing to fix it or make it go away, or to turn away from it. This is why we practice in community; we can help each other hear and hold the discomfort and pain. We can offer rituals to grieve and hope, we can offer a listening ear for each other, and we answer calls to action to create the world we imagine together.

At the heart of all this is the spiritual practice of love; (OK, that makes four spiritual practices!) I'm not talking about romantic love, but the love that Valerie Kaur calls revolutionary love, the love preached by Jesus and other prophets. Love for others, love for our opponents, love for ourselves. Love that is an intentional choice, the labor of caring for each other and for ourselves, love grounded in relationships across differences.

Over the next 25 years the demographics of this nation will shift so that the number of people of color will be greater than the number of white people for the first time since colonization. Imagine the potential for creativity and innovation; it's amazing. And those of us who are white have some things to learn as we make this shift.

OUUC is not yet a multicultural space and we have some work to do to be ready for that, work within ourselves and within our community. I am encouraged by the good work that has been done and the work we continue to do. I encourage you to find places within the OUUC community where you can learn and practice across differences. The good news is that spiritual practices can be taught, modeled and practiced—awareness, curiosity, being with discomfort, love. Our faith community can be a place where we learn and practice together, doing the inner and outer work to grow.

Wouldn't it be great if we could just see people's souls, who we really are? I'm afraid we all have screens through which we experience the world. They are real screens now, but even when we gather in person again, we'll still have screens—the limitations of our senses, the biases and filters that we are taught and the ones we develop over the course of our lives. The more we understand and are aware of our screens, the better we will be seeing each other's souls, at being together and different.

So, whether you are a donkey or a dog or a cat or a rooster, bring all of who you are and let's imagine the music we can make together!

May we by our actions make this so.

Let's be in silence together.