

SERMON - “No Exceptions?” Rev. Patience Stoddard, July 17, 2016
with readings from *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person—Without Exception* by Nathan C. Walker

I have a bumper sticker on my car that was given to me a the Music Director in Springfield. It says: “God bless the whole world. No exceptions.”

No exceptions.

Mostly I feel good about my bumper sticker. It states what I think of as the core message of Universalism – that God (however one may understand that word) does not pick favorites. That every single person... and many would say every single being... is of worth and value, regardless of sect or creed, regardless of social standing, regardless of race or cultural background, regardless of beliefs or political viewpoint, regardless of behavior, regardless...

However to affirm this is one thing, to live it another.

In the wake of incident after incident of innocent people being the victims of mass shootings or bombing, the continuing crisis for Syrian and Afghan refugees who can’t find any safe place to live after fleeing the violence in their own countries, and the vitriol and name calling under the guise of political speech – there seem to be many people on whom to place blame, many persons and groups whom it is tempting to revile, to cross off the “good people” list, to set outside the circle of our concern and caring.

But what happens to our inner selves and our communities when exceptions are made, when some people aren’t welcome, when the world or the community or the nation divide into groups which - in the name of righteousness - demean, exclude and disrespect each other?

What happens when, in the name of justice and equality, we are no longer willing to even listen to each other?

These are questions that Nathan Walker, former UU minister of First Church Philadelphia, has asked himself and out of that exploration has written a book called: *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person—Without Exception*.

What does justice making look like, feel like...? It all depends on our beliefs about power.

I once believed that it was powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believed it right to tear down another's unexamined assumptions and to vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention. I believed that others were the cause of my aggression, others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment and righteous indignation.

Rather than anger serving as a signal that something was wrong, anger became the solution to all my problems. It felt good to fuel the addiction of righteousness. I was doing justice- I was doing justice – all while being an ass.

I have spent far too much energy using the public forum as a battlefield. I have spent far too much energy using the public forum to annihilate those I perceived as my enemy. I have armed myself with faithful friends, so that each time we walked into the room, those present would shade their gaze and whisper in dread, "The liberals have arrived."

I used to believe that being feared was powerful. I used to believe it was my duty to free the oppressed. But when I react with righteous anger, I become the oppressor.

As Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist once said, "I came to set the prisoner free only to realize the prisoner was me."

"It felt good to fuel the addiction of righteousness." I certainly recognize that "good" feeling. I wonder, do you?

One of my earlier memories of taking what I thought of as a brave stand, of "speaking truth to power" was when I was a student at my Quaker School. I'd just been a student rep at the Regional Conference of Independent Schools and heard numerous examples of how these schools strove to live up to their high ethical ideals. Looking at my own school and moreover listening to all the complaints of my friends about feeling put down by teachers as well as other students, I took it upon myself to attend a faculty meeting and, I thought calmly and reasonably, to tell them that they were not doing a very good job and, in what I thought was the most respectful way, explain to them how they might do things differently. I felt

very proud of myself; my friends were in awe of my courage, and... absolutely nothing changed.

It was years, no, decades, before I realized that, like Nathan Walker, I had been being an ass.

If telling people that they are wrong was all that was needed to promote positive social change, we'd be a lot closer to addressing racism, global warming and many other social ills.

But boy it can feel good to get up on that high horse and preach to the masses, to finally fight fire with fire, to march down main street stopping traffic and screaming "Peace Now!"

What it doesn't do is actually change minds, though sometimes it can change us.

The more we see ourselves as different from others; the more fully we view our positions as 100% right and other's as 100% wrong; the more threatened we feel by others' values or behavior – the more likely we are to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

At the heart of many conflicts is a way of seeing the world as divided into us and them -- the good guys and the bad guys. Whether we think of the increasing tension and distrust between police and black Americans, between Suni and Shia, liberals and conservatives, native born and immigrant, the more a group perceives itself as inherently different from others, the less likely they are to even try to understand those perceived to be the other. Walker puts it this way: *Otherness is a root of violence... Violent cycles begin when fear and bigotry plague the imagination;* or, in other words, *Barbaric acts are made possible when we 'otherize' another person.*

We can see the fruits of this Us and Them - or Me and Not Me way of seeing the world everywhere, not only in ethnic and cultural conflicts, but also in our increasingly hyper-partisan politics, or even in interpersonal conflicts within families or congregations. The more different and disconnected we feel from others, the easier it is to discount their views or belittle their loyalties.

There is another way. By asking open ended questions and really listening to the answers, by seeking to understand the needs and motivations that lead to another's actions, by actively trying to use one's imagination to stand in another's shoes – these are some of the ways to lessen the distance

between self and other and thereby to open the possibility of moving forward together.

To believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person does not preclude opposing their actions or challenging their assumptions. Some beliefs and actions need to be opposed because they endanger others and tear at the fabric of community. But when we fail to recognize some of these tendencies in ourselves, we lose the perspective that allows us to respond with compassion. Without a sense of our common humanity, we cease to look for solutions and instead look for ways to discount or oppress or eliminate those who threaten us. We become builders of walls rather than bridges.

Walker states: *Most of justice work is centered around doing—strategizing, protesting, mobilizing. Effective leaders also know how to lead by being.; they lead by being kind and empathic and understanding and creative. They no longer spend all their energy doing and doing and doing justice; they spend an equal amount in training themselves how to use their very presence to transform rather than escalate conflicts.*

Nathan Walker calls this self-training *using the moral imagination as an every day spiritual practice*. And one of the best places to do this is in a congregation, an intentional “Shame-free zone” where we are asked to examine our own prejudices and shortcomings while being simultaneously cared for and held to a higher standard. Congregations are a great place to practice this moral imagination. Whatever the disagreement or conflict, we can seek to resolve it best when we work to listen to and understand the needs and wants of others through open communication, deep listening, and an awareness of our own imperfections.

Please Call Me By My True Names

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow-
 even today I am still arriving.
 Look deeply: every second I am arriving
 to be a bud on a Spring branch,
 to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
 learning to sing in my new nest,
 to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,

to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.
I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.
I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.
I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.
I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.
My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion