

“Turning Inside Out”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, June 7, 2009

A few weeks ago I attended a seminar through the University of Tulsa Business School, and at one point they paired us up with another person whom we had never met. Our assignment was to introduce ourselves to each other. The lady I was paired with went first; it turned out she was a divorced mother who works as a dealer in a local casino. She talked about how much she liked the casino business, and I could just tell by the way her introduction was unfolding that she was going to be very surprised when she learned I am a minister.

Sure enough, when it was time to switch, and I told her I was a man of the cloth, she blushed and looked a bit embarrassed. So, I quickly explained to her that All Souls is a very progressive and open-minded church. To make sure she understood, I explained that we are the kind of church where people who may want to go to the casino on Saturday night and maybe even have a drink and smoke a cigarette, can come on Sunday morning and not be made to feel ashamed or hypocritical. I said, “It’s a church where people can come and raise their children with a basic understanding of the Bible, and where they can get a religious and moral and ethical foundation without the guilt and shame and judgment that people often associate with churches. I told her we are a friendly and fun-loving people, who care about making a difference in the world and giving back to society. She said that All Souls sounds like a church she would feel comfortable in, and that she had been looking for a church for herself and her daughter. In fact, she was so enthusiastic, that when the entire group came back together, she voluntarily announced to everyone in the seminar what had transpired, and told them she planned to visit All Souls.

We say each week that *Love is the Spirit of this Church...* But we can be just as judgmental and hypocritical as anyone if we are not careful. So what does the spirit of love and inclusion require of us? Anyone can hang a shingle out in front of their church or shop that makes a bodacious claim. I just saw one while driving through Brookside this morning that claimed: “Best pulled pork in Tulsa.” I thought, “Really? Who says it is?” I’m sure it was the owner who put that in front of his own restaurant. I mean, how reliable is that? Coming from the proprietor himself? Anybody can make big declarations about his own pulled pork (or about his own church for that matter.) So, today I want to look closely at the question: “What does the spirit of radical love and inclusion require of us?”

I want to start with a true story often told by Stephen Covey¹ He says:

[I remember] one Sunday morning on a subway in NY City. People were sitting quietly – some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed. The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's papers. It was very disturbing. And, yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So, finally, with what I felt was an unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, 'Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?' The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, 'Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either.'

It is so easy to draw common conclusions, and become justified and judgmental. Like taking a well-worn path, it is easy to see and simple to follow; it has been traveled many times before. But in this church, we are called to blaze a new trail – a trail of radical love and acceptance. We are called to depart from the well-worn path of judgment and common conclusions to the courageous path of loving inclusion. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? It almost rhymes. But how do we make it into more than a fancy slogan or an empty promise? How do we take such words and give them flesh and bones to walk the earth?

In the Bible, in the book of John, it says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us." It is a description of incarnation – in *carne*, or "in the flesh." It is the idea that that which is spirit became "embodied" and walked the earth. Of course, people will be debating until the end of time what this means in reference to Jesus 2000 years ago. But I am not interested in that particular discussion this morning. I want to talk about, "to what extent are you and I called to take our words and make them flesh?" What does it *mean* to us, on a human level, today, to bring about the wonder of incarnation? What I am interested in, is what risks we are willing to take, to allow a supreme ideal such as radical love and acceptance to reside right here on earth, in Tulsa, in history, in our lives. And moreover, what does it look like to clothe such a supreme ideal in our earthly imperfection?

It has been said that the longest journey we will ever take is the one from the head to the heart. We can think and say all kinds of wonderful things about love and inclusion and freedom

and justice, but if they remain only words or ideas we are no more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. These ideas have to go beyond the head and the lips, where they are merely intangible concepts, and take the lengthy journey to enter the imperfect clay of our hearts, where they can *take form* through the actions of our bodies.

When I think of other short but formidable distances, I think of a couple of hand gestures I learned in the Middle East. Did you know that when someone puts a hand out in front of them with the fingers together, in the Middle East, it is a blessing? But if they put their hand out in front, in the same way, with their fingers spread apart, it is a curse. What is the real difference? Just a few inches. But traveling those few inches back from a curse to a blessing is a long distance. The fingers of the hand, in this case, which are either separate or together, could represent a lot of different things. Muslims, Christians and Jews. Theists, deists, atheists and pantheists. Democrats, Republicans, Independents and Libertarians. There is no shortage of things that divide humanity – nationality, race, religion, politics, etc. But the thumb – the thumb is what distinguishes us from most other creatures. The thumb can work with all the fingers in the hand. It is the thumb that can turn otherwise independent digits that cannot work very well together, into a highly functioning unit. The thumb, in this analogy, represents the leaven, the Levites, the levelers of the playing field.

As Universalists, as inclusionists, as Unitarians, as Uniters, we have a special role, to be like the opposable thumbs of history and humanity. We have a special role to play in the realization of the ideal of Beloved Community. We have a special role to play in the building of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Because in the end, all that serves to divide up humanity, curses it. And all that serves to unite humanity, blesses it.

We have this special role in human history, in part, because we do not presume to think we have the one and only right way. We do not want the whole world and all its inhabitants to become just like us. We appreciate the different faiths and cultures of the world, and we are glad to support them and even to learn from them. That puts us in a unique position to be bridge-builders and connectors, to sow love where there is hate, to bring unity where there is division, and to establish peace and goodwill among men and women.

Some ideologies believe the only way to unite humanity is to make everyone think and believe alike. That is like trying to turn everyone in this glorious creation into an index finger. And the index finger is also the favorite finger of such people as they like to point it and wave it at others who are different from them. (Which often elicits a one-finger response of its own, another finger, that I won't demonstrate this morning.) But the idea is to celebrate our differences, because

like the different fingers of a hand, each person and each culture and each religion has its own special role to play.

So, *how* do we do it? First, we have to move from being justified in our judgmentalism, to being courageous in our curiosity. It goes back to the story at the beginning about the children on the subway. On the outside, it looked like they were bad kids and the father was a bad parent. Look out, here comes the index finger! Bad... bad... bad! The kids were running amok on the subway while their father was sitting oblivious with his eyes closed. Upon further investigation, however, we find out that they were all returning from the hospital where the children's mother had just died. They were exhausted and confused and didn't know what to think or do. The real story exposed everyone in that subway's common humanity. Anyone could be in that same situation, and no one would really know what to do. What it means for us is that we need to catch ourselves when we begin to judge others, and see how it cuts us off from them, and even more so, cuts us off from our own humanity.

We are called to learn to become courageous in our curiosity, so that we can go deeper. So that we can ask someone who is different from us, *why* they believe the way they do. Right here in this church, we have the opportunity to ask someone, "So, you are atheist... why?" and really pay attention to the answer, knowing that there's a story there that will likely connect us to that person's humanity and also to our own humanity. "You love Jesus or Buddha... why?" "You feel a strong need to thank God everyday... why?" That is the kind of courageous community and courageous curiosity that blazes a trail of radical acceptance and inclusion.

It is much easier to stick to our stereotypes and to draw lines in the sand. But part of the demand placed upon us by this faith, is to be curious and courageous. To find out why that man has a long pony tail at the age of 60. To learn why that teenager wears a knit cap in the summer. What about the one who has the tattoo on his neck? The one who decorates her nails with plastic jewels? The one who dyes her hair cherry red? Or, who carries a Bible? Or who wears a turban. Or the one who wears a Muslim head scarf. How about the one who crosses himself before crossing the street? Or the one who has that offensive bumper sticker on his car? The one who eats vegan? Or wears sunglasses inside? The one who wears rings on her thumbs or a cross around her neck? The one who doesn't look you in the eyes and the one who stares too long, and doesn't seem to know when to avert his gaze. Don't forget the one with a dead-fish for a handshake, as well as the one who squeezes way too hard. The one who breaks into tears so easily, and the one who can't cry even when she desperately wants to. The one who says *I love you* when you just met minutes before, and the one who can't say *I love you* even to his own family. The one who thinks she has all the answers and the one who thinks there are no answers,

only questions. This world, this church, our families, are filled with all kinds of people. We can choose to judge, and create distance, or we can become curious and find ways to unite people with our love and our common humanity.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "It doesn't mean we need to *like* all these people, we just need to love them." There are a lot of people I'll probably never like. I'll probably never like the people who picket funerals of dead soldiers carrying signs that say "God hates fags." I'll probably never like the neo-Nazi skinheads who think they're part of a super-race just because of the color of their skin. But I believe we are called to try to love them. I believe we are called to keep our hearts open, even to them, so they do not end up making us in their own image. So that they don't get us to start to dehumanizing anyone, even them. Because as soon as we dehumanize another, we have lost our own precious humanity.

Dehumanization begins with judging, which usually comes from fear and misunderstanding. In a speech to US troops in Bosnia, Bill Clinton, our then President, described it like this:

[T]hink about what Kosovo is all about. People were taught to hate people who were from a different ethnic group than they were, who worshipped God in a different way. They started out by being afraid of them and misunderstanding them. Then, they came to hate them. And then after hating them for a good while, they came to dehumanize them. And once you decide that someone you're looking at is no longer a human being, it's not so hard to justify killing them, or burning them out of house and home, or torturing their children, or doing all the other things you have heard.

It all starts -- it all starts with the inability to recognize the inherent dignity and equality of someone who is different from ourselves.

I began this morning by reminding us that we better mean it when we say, *Love is the Spirit of this Church*, or else we are just as hypocritical as anyone reading a creed or professing a belief they do not embody. Then I talked about how we become practitioners of radical love and acceptance, by moving from judgment (which is usually based in fear and misunderstanding) to courageous curiosity. And how, by doing so, we can be like the thumb of a hand, helping to unify the differences. We do it because we know that being divided is a curse, and united we can bless the world. And so we strive to love people – even those who we cannot like.

My final point this morning is this: the only way we will ever come to accept anyone else, is if we have already come to accept ourselves. I don't know about you, but I know that when I am feeling bad and tired and unhappy with myself or my life, I become one of the most judgmental people on the planet. I can see a person one day, who has a blue Mohawk and piercings all over his eyebrows, and if I'm having a bad day and feeling unhappy or insecure about myself, I can

think all kinds of shameful things about the person's parents and his life and his intelligence. But on another day, when I have had enough sleep and am feeling happy and self-assured, and I see that same person, I can feel a sense of gratitude for life's diversity. I can find myself wondering with fascination what gifts he may be offering the world. And that is how I know in my very bones, that radical love and acceptance begin with how well we are able to love and take care of ourselves. It involves our ability to learn to be honest about, and accepting of, our own flaws and failings.

Incarnation is about embodying our high ideals within the challenges and constraints of our current reality. It is probably not something we can do in every moment, but rather something we need to keep striving for and practicing at, again and again. Even when it seems improbable, and when we feel inadequate to live up to the task, we are called to keep trying. We are called to clothe these divine principles in our own mortal imperfection. So that our words become flesh, and thus come to walk amongst us on the earth.

God bless you.

Amen.

¹ Covey, Stephen, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Free Press. 1989 pp 30-31