

Sermon Keeping Our Enemies Closer
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Sermon Keeping Our Enemies Closer Rev. Sarah Person

“Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one’s own direction. Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.” “We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.” These are words to live by, but how hard they can be to live!

Last Monday, Barbara Bancroft led another great session of Ritual and Reflection, a six week program of videos by Tara Brach, gentle yoga and conversation. Brach was talking about the concept of Namaste, and the practice of soul recognition. Namaste is a Sanskrit word, a greeting: I bow to the divine in you. I see the light in you. Soul recognition is the practice of finding and embracing the light within us as a place of wisdom and understanding from which the soul acts with intention for the greater good. It is the inner sphere that underlies the surface world of experiences. It is the deep place within us from which we can truly form interconnections and resonate with others. To get to that place, we have to get past the surface; the filters, the criticisms and labels we have absorbed from our experiences. Also, to get to that place so that we can truly connect with others, we have to get past *their* surfaces as well.

Tara Brach illustrated one of her points with a story of a confrontation between a man and a shaky mugger who was determined to shoot him, his victim. The man reassured his mugger that he had done good; he’d robbed him of plenty and didn’t have to shoot. The man lived to tell the tale by connecting with his attacker. This of course sent my mind off on a tangent about enemies.

There’s a phrase we all remember from “The Godfather, Part II” “Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.” Don Corleone’s warning to Michael probably meant so that you could make a move on them before they did on you. In case you’re wondering, that is not what this sermon is about. It’s just the way my mind works when I’m trying to meditate.

I’m not immune to or ignorant about how helpless and ugly humans can be with each other. It is a part of our common humanity, a part of my story and yours. Part of my desire for a spiritual practice is to give myself the space to recognize the depth of my feelings about these things and still hold on to that connection with others when I see it. In my musings after the program, I tried to visualize what it might be like to welcome the people who have caused me suffering to my Thanksgiving table. Will I ever have the capacity to offer my feast of abundant grace to my enemies?

What makes people do the things they do? We all have these doubts. Sometimes we are wounded. Sometimes we discover that we are no longer living the life we wanted. We yearn to know we are okay anyway, that we are safe, cared for, respected, that we belong, that we are whole. When we see others threatening our capacity to be and have those things, we get disconnected. We either give up wanting what we need to thrive, or we give up on one another. I know this in my head and heart. I know how for all of us, anger and fear shake our relationships with one another. I’ve been there, you’ve been there. What I didn’t realize was how much it could disconnect me from myself.

As I listened to Tara Brach, I thought about my own very recent brush with a criminal. No, I wasn’t attacked, but I was in the vicinity of a young man who, along with his friends, had been victimizing a family we’ve been helping. I was escorting them out of the complex and away to a new start. As we passed each other in the parking lot he kept his eyes and shoulders down and his face a bleak mask. I was furious beyond words. You know how you can get obsessed with being angry? Keep on thinking about the ‘what ifs’? Keep going over the experience in your mind? The family is now safe and out of the situation, but I couldn’t let it go.

In the week that followed, though, I realized something about the young man's body language – he wasn't threatening as much as he was resigned. As I reflected on that, I realized something else, too. I wasn't so angry anymore. Why did the thought of his bleakness quiet me? In recognizing the young criminal's bleakness, I recognized his humanness. Somehow that diminished my own anger so that it didn't take such a toll on me. Because I was suffering by not being able to let it go.

I remembered other times I've been hurt or outraged. You grow up with people, grow to know people, and you know which buttons can get pushed. But, hopefully, sooner or later you figure out where they were coming from and you check yourself to see if you can get past your own hurt to see theirs. Sometimes it is worth it just to get back on an even keel. Maybe, I thought, this is what soul recognition is all about.

We are all connected. This is what faith tells us, and it can be the hardest truth to live by. We are all connected somehow in deep ways by our humanity. Of course, when we are suffering; troubled by another person, frightened or angry, it is difficult to remember their humanity, to remember that connection – to see that light in *that* particular person. Why is that? It's because in those moments we can't see the light in ourselves. In those moments of confrontation, we may suddenly see ourselves as *they* see us; victim, threat, disappointment, less deserving, shameful. In those moments, we need to dig our way through those dark lenses of insecurity to find our own light or we get stuck.

At times like these, I remember Neil Douglas-Klotz's translation of the Lord's Prayer from the original Aramaic language:

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos
Focus your light within us—make it useful.
Create your reign of unity now—
through our fiery hearts and willing hands.
Help us love beyond our ideals
and sprout acts of compassion for all creatures.
Animate the earth within us:
we then feel the Wisdom underneath supporting all.
Untangle the knots within
so that we can mend our hearts' simple ties to each other.
Don't let surface things delude us,
but free us from what holds us back from our true purpose.
Out of you, the astonishing fire,
returning light and sound to the cosmos.
Amen.

“Untangle the knots within so that we can mend our hearts' simple ties to each other.” Untangle our own knots so that we can once again bind ourselves to one another. That is the origin of religion, isn't it? *Religio* to bind to one another.

'Aramaic' says Douglas-Klotz, 'does not draw sharp lines between means and ends, or between an inner quality and an outer action. Both are always present. When Jesus refers to the "kingdom of heaven," this kingdom is always both within and among us. Like- wise, "neighbor" is both inside and outside, as is the "self" that we are to love to the same degree as our "neighbor.'" (Douglas-Klotz, Neil. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus' Words* (pp. 3-4). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.)

The notion of soul recognition is that – even in that moment of trouble, of trauma, or perhaps in remembering the trauma – we can find strength and vulnerability and purpose deep within ourselves. It is faith that utters the silent prayer: I have a light in me. I see the light in you. You are infuriating me, scaring me, trying to

make me feel ashamed, but I will quiet myself and wade through all that until I see something in you I recognize. Because I would be at peace with myself, I will not accept your perceptions and words and actions but I will try to understand them. Because I *do* have a light in me, and I also see a light in you. Soul recognition asks a response.

I'm talking about two things here, aren't I? I'm talking about letting go of anger and fear, and changing our relationship to our suffering as a way of becoming more whole. But I'm also talking about recognizing that one purpose in doing this is to find inner peace, and another purpose is to open the way to connect with others.

Why should we do this? This is hard work. Why give up feeling righteous, wronged, outraged? Well, for one thing, it is healthier for you. Being preoccupied with anger disconnects us from our capacity for peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life. What is the purpose of forgiveness? The greatest misconception about forgiveness is the belief that forgiving the offense... means you condone it. Not true. Nor does it mean you have to reconcile with someone who treated you badly. Forgiveness has little or nothing to do with another person because forgiveness is an internal matter. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. It is not something you do for someone else.

Sylvia Boorstein: "I'll add a line that a man named Tom, in a class I taught many, many years ago, said to me after I'd spoken about the futility of anger: "Well Sylvia, I'm sure you know that forgiveness is the price you have to pay for freedom."

What you can do for someone else, if it is worth it to you, is to try to understand. Can you recognize something in the other, some feeling or experience that reminds you of your own experiences? Remember the impact it had on you, and how you acted upon it?

GAINSVILLE, Fla. October 20, 2017 — A video shows the moment a black man hugged a white supremacist outside white nationalist leader Richard Spencer's speech Thursday afternoon at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

In the video, 31-year-old Aaron Alex Courtney is seen hugging the man and asking, "Why don't you like me, dog?"

"I asked him, 'Why do you hate me? What is it about me? Is it my skin color? My history? My dreadlocks?'"

When the man looked away and avoided his questions, he gave him a hug.

"I reached over and the third time, he wrapped his arms around me, and I heard God whisper in my ear, 'You changed his life,'" Courtney said.

When he asked again, "Why do you hate me?" the man replied, "I don't know."

<http://wnep.com/2017/10/20/black-man-hugs-nazi-outside-richard-spencer-event-asks-him-why-do-you-hate-me/>

Maybe it is worth it. Maybe mindfulness and meditation will help us go to that point that place. Maybe prayer will help – 'a cleansing prayer that walks us through blessing, letting go, breakthrough, and compassion.' (Douglas-Klotz, Neil. Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus' Words (pp. 2-3). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.)

What is it worth to you? Who can you invite to sit beside you at the table to live in grace?