

“Radical Hospitality”
by the Rev. Meghan Conrad
Preached on March 11, 2007 at UUCM

[Song: “Will you Harbor Me?” by Sweet Honey and the Rock]

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

A harbor is more than a place to anchor, it is a safe haven, a refuge. So the question is more than will we open our communities and our homes; it is also “will we open our hearts to the stranger?” That question is at the core of what is called “radical hospitality.”

The word ‘radical’ implies ‘extreme’. Pushing the limits. When it is paired with “hospitality” it means nudging oneself beyond our usual comfort zone to receive a person unlike oneself.

In my opinion the single most important message that Jesus taught his followers – if you boil down all the parables and lessons - is that of radical hospitality - to learn to welcome the stranger into our midst.

It is true that people in that day lived in a much different society. There were vast differences among the various groups of people. In the days before global media it must have been so much more shocking to run across someone from a foreign culture. Jesus spoke about treating each person we meet as the Holy disguised in flesh – looking beyond the surface differences.

Jesus taught his disciples that it is in the space between the stranger and the self that the divine is encountered.

He told them: “When I was thirsty, you gave me water; when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me.”

When his disciples balked and said, “when did this ever happen?”. “when were you ever, thirsty and we gave you water, when were you ever hungry and we fed you, and when did we welcome you as a stranger?” Jesus replied: “What you do to the least of these [pointing into the crowd that had gathered to hear them] you do unto me.”

Or, the same idea from a mystical point of view: we are all drops of water from the same eternal, infinite ocean. Scientists now believe that all forms of creation

– trees, stones, rivers and people – are just different configurations of ancient stardust. The same energy and matter that has always been – continues to shift forms.

When I meditate about creation in these terms I begin to feel a sort of connectedness or Oneness with the all of life. From this perspective the dissimilarity among various people seems petty and unimportant.

A secular Humanist might say quite simply that there is inherent worth and dignity in all of humanity, and that our highest goal and aspiration is to respect and cherish each person regardless of our differences.

This congregation is truly becoming a warm, welcoming place where visitors can feel at home. But the radical hospitality that I am talking about is so much more than giving guests a warm welcome. It reaches beyond the desire for people to join our community. It is an ongoing spiritual practice...looking beneath the surface and engaging with the essence of holiness that is the foundation of every person.

Like every spiritual practice it is challenging. One of my mentors once said, “If your spiritual practice isn’t mildly uncomfortable, if it isn’t asking you to stretch, then you are not doing it right.”

The Quaker author, Parker Palmer talks about the problems religious communities have with practicing radical hospitality. He writes:

“...If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit, and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are [often] aimed at making the stranger “one of us.” The essence of hospitality – and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.”

The point of radical hospitality is not to convert anyone. Nor does it mean that we have to be all things to all people. Not everyone who walks through our door is a UU who just doesn’t know it yet. Some people come to our church to visit us for a while and they may or may not feel they belong here. That is okay.

Radical hospitality welcomes strangers and gives them the chance to get to know who we are and the freedom to chose for themselves to join us or not.

Part of the practice is the internal recognition of our reactions to people who we consider ‘strangers’. To whom do we find it the hardest to extend hospitality? The answers for each of us are probably different.

We liberal religious people pride ourselves on being open and accepting. As an association, anyway, we are not there yet; we are not living up to our ideals.

Two years ago at our General Assembly of Congregations in Ft. Worth, Texas there were several incidents of racial discrimination. Like a mirror held up to our communal face we need to look - even if we’re not proud of what we see.

At the closing ceremony an usher tried to bar admission to a group of African American teenagers. The teens were Unitarian Universalist youth.

In response the UUA board issued an open letter in which they said:

“We have been disturbed by reports of other unfortunate incidents during General Assembly within our own Unitarian Universalist family, in which some UU youth of color were made to feel that they were not welcome. There was an incident outside the hall during the closing ceremonies at the Fort Worth General Assembly. Based on the reports of witnesses, the incident involved several UU youth of color, a UU adult who questioned their right to be there, provoking an angry response from the youth, a UU minister who intervened in support of the adult, and another white youth who defended the youth of color and verbally attacked the minister, who responded in like fashion with similar inflammatory language.

This was not the only incident. We have also heard that on several occasions in Fort Worth , white UUs assumed that UU youth of color were hotel service people and asked them to carry luggage or park cars.

We are troubled that some UUs may have treated other UUs as if they did not belong among us. We can and must do better.”

This is happening in our own religious community – these are our young people.

What would a community that practiced true radical hospitality be like?

There is an old Chassidic story I once heard that comes to mind:

Deep in the forest, there was a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once thriving, things had now become so bad that there were only four monks and the abbot left, all over seventy. The monastery was clearly dying.

Despairing over the monastery's decline, the abbot decided to visit a wise rabbi and seek his counsel. The rabbi welcomed the abbot and listened carefully to him. But, when the abbot finished his sad tale, the rabbi only shook his head and said, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone from the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to synagogue anymore."

The two men wept together. Then they read Torah and spoke of many deep things.

Eventually the abbot had to leave. As the two men embraced, the rabbi said, "I'm sorry I had no advice for you. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

The abbot returned to the monastery, He sadly told the monks, "The rabbi couldn't help, We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say was that the Messiah was one of us. I don't know what he meant."

The monks pondered. What *did* the rabbi mean? Is the Messiah *really* one of *us*?

The abbot maybe?

Or, Brother Thomas who is so clearly a holy man?

Surely *not* Brother Elred, who is too crotchety. But, when you come right down to it, in retrospect Brother Elred is always right about things.

Brother Phillip maybe. No, Phillip is so quiet and passive. Still, when you really need someone, Brother Phillip has a way of magically appearing.

Maybe the rabbi meant one of the visitors who come here from time to time. Has the Messiah been here and we didn't even know it? Or is he on his way?

Surely the rabbi didn't mean me! I'm just an ordinary person.But... what if he *did* mean me? Oh God, I am not the Messiah am I? I couldn't be that much for you, could I?

As the pondering continued, the monks began to treat each other with deep respect, just in case one of them really was the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with respect, too. Just in case...

Occasionally hikers coming through the forest would visit the monastery, sometimes stopping to pray in the dilapidated chapel. They began to notice something strangely compelling about the monastery. For one thing, the monks radiated love and respect.

People began to make special trips to the forest, just to be in the presence of the monks. They brought their families and friends to show them that special place.

Some of the younger men began to talk to the old monks. And then one young man decided to take orders. And then another joined. And another. And another. Within a few years, the monastery was thriving again, Thanks to the rabbi's gift, it became a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

What would radical hospitality have looked like between the adults and the youth of color at GA? Imagine if all parties involved instead treated one another with deep respect and love.

Is there room enough in our community and in our hearts for people of different ethnicities? Different genders or sexual orientations? People with disabilities? People with mental illness? Teenagers? Toddlers? Men and women who have been imprisoned? People who use different religious language? People who vote differently than you do?

I hear some anxiety behind the question: "Can we draw the circle wide enough to include people we may now consider 'strangers' without threatening the integrity of our community?"

Openly inviting people very different than ourselves into our congregation can be frightening. What would it mean to re-envision our community? Does being receptive to strangers mean loss of our community's identity?

Not, I think, if we firmly know who we are, and are willing to share that with others. It is important to be able to engage in dialog with people as to who we are as individuals and what it means to be a part of our community.

Catholic theologian Henry Nouwen says that confrontation is the other side of the coin of hospitality. Confrontation, not as it is understood as aggression, Nouwen means rather the willingness to step up and boldly show other people who we are. He writes:

"We are not hospitable when we leave our house to strangers and let them use it any way they want. An empty house is not a hospitable house...When we want to be really hospitable we not only have to receive strangers but also to confront them by unambiguous presence, showing our ideas, opinions and life styles clearly and distinctly. Receptivity without confrontation leads to bland neutrality....Confrontation with out receptivity leads to aggression."

What do we as Unitarian Universalists stand for? What unites us as a religious community? As a denomination? What is our unambiguous presence?

Do we know and can we articulate what sets our congregation apart from the one in Auburn or those in Sacramento.

These are a lot of questions but I think we need to engage with them.

We tend to have a difficult time describing our religion to others. We've been known to challenge one another with creating what we call our "elevator speech". That is, if we are on the 12th floor in an elevator and someone asks us about Unitarian Universalism what do we say in the 45 seconds before we get to the lobby?

Our definition of ourselves needs to be open to changes. Clearly those white UU's who asked the teenagers of color to park their cars and carry their luggage need to expand their idea of what a UU looks like. Maybe we all do.

I like to think of an individual congregation or even our whole UU movement as a river. It flows downhill through time. The membership at any given period sees only the part of the river that flows past our view. We tend to forget all that brought the river to us and often neglect to think of those who will come into contact with it much farther down stream.

The people in this room are the stewards of the UU Community of the Mountains River right now. Together we help shape this community's future. Our actions right now can shift the river's direction.

What I'm asking of us is radical. We are already a welcoming and vibrant congregation. I think we are strong enough that we can begin to draw the circle even wider. Lets not grow complacent, lets take some risks. Radical hospitality is not a goal to be accomplished – it is an ongoing spiritual practice.

A river is a living thing – it does not stand still. It is continually changing its shape and the shape of what surrounds it. It is constantly pushing limits. And in doing so it remains a vital wellspring for generations to come.

May it be so.

Amen.