



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Who Belongs?

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, October 6, 2019

My journey towards inclusion has not been a righteous one. Along the path of these thirty years in ministry I have had to overcome deep prejudice. And even today, I am far from as inclusive as I hoped to be. I confess this not to clear my conscience (that would take a lot more than one sermon) but for you to see that it is not easy to truly open our hearts and doors to the strangers among us.

My first lesson in inclusion happened when I was still in seminary in Chicago. As a young idealist, and a new father, I wanted desperately to fit in. I had returned to graduate school in my thirties and I was unsure of my calling and my abilities. One day while sitting around the storied Curtis Room at Meadville Lombard Theological School at the University of Chicago, a group of us men (we were predominantly men in the 1980s) were debating the idea of same sex unions. So tender was this subject that we used the euphemism of “union” rather than “marriage” back then. None of my student colleagues were gay (to my knowledge). Several of my cohort thought this was a good idea. Why shouldn’t two people in love have the benefits of marriage? One of us said we should just call it marriage and be done with it. The fact of the matter is that many UU ministers at that time were already officiating at same sex unions although often at risk of censure from their congregations. As I sat there I had a visceral reaction as I imagined two men kissing. The image disturbed me deeply. “Perhaps they could just hug” I imagined to myself. I would later realize that this revulsion was more about me and my own immature feelings about sexuality, and not gay marriage. Out of my mouth comes a vociferous objection “No way” I yelled “that is just too far, what’s next? Polygamy?” (Well, actually polyamory is a movement today but that is a sermon for another time)

Everybody stopped talking and stared at me. “Oh crap” I thought to myself, “I really stepped in it this time”. What ensued though was a deep and honest conversation on what our theology of love really means. I won’t say I was convinced but my mind and heart began to change.

I would take decades of ministry, and being witness to the heartbreak of same sex partners being denied hospital visitation when a loved one was dying because they lacked the right of marriage, decades of witnessing couples not only become married but raise beautiful children, face the heartbreak of divorce, and in a supreme irony, have two of my own five daughters come out as gay. By the end of several decades of ministry, I had gone from being a homophobic to become a staunch ally of marriage equality, as an activist for California’s marriage equality status. On the first day of marriage equality I was on the steps of the courthouse outside Los Angeles performing marriages for free while my congregants handed out free wedding cupcakes.

The journey towards inclusion, our quest to continually widen our tent to include all identities, has been at best uneven and at worst cruel. We were the first denomination to ordain LGBT people, the first to argue for gay rights. We have tried and failed at welcoming people of color into our midst. We are trying to reach out to those differently abled and we are mostly incognizant of Trans and queer people. We have had a long struggle with being elitist in our manner of worship and acceptance of anyone who isn’t middle class and college educated.

Our failures are real. We are 97% white, vastly cis-gendered, and 90% college educated, this despite decades of wanting diversity. I believe the problem has been that we have not been willing to really look at ourselves and our white privilege and to begin to undo the myriad of microaggressions towards people of color, Trans people, women and the disabled. The good news is that we are finally coming to grips with our white privilege and beginning to take seriously the work of becoming anti-racist. Our intern minister

Margalie Belzair's focused initiative to begin to take an honest look at ourselves is a powerful start. I will have much more to say about this as the year progresses.

We are only beginning to truly embrace gender equity through our own work on women's rights and safety here in our own church. Our #MeToo resolution passed several years ago set the stage for our MeToo Council, which has and will continue to do the work of creating a safe space for women here and in our community. (See She Said by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, 2019) Recently, the council decided to enlarge its mandate to issues surrounding gender more broadly and we have renamed the Council the Gender Equity Team. This team is comprised of incredible women and men who are not only beginning to look at the prevalence of patriarchy in our congregation but how we welcome and relate to those with different gender identities. Will that team please stand up? Our ministry will be to broaden our understanding of transsexual, gender fluid and queer identities. If these words mean nothing to you then we have proven our point.

Like my early homophobia, my early encounter with transgendered people was not my best moment. Several years into my ministry in Frederick Maryland, we had grown by leaps and bounds. Francis was the Director of Religious Education and I was the minister, we had taken a fellowship of 72 adults and 4 children to a congregation of over 300 adults and almost 200 children in five short years. We had long outgrown our small house church and were renting a college auditorium that seated 400 and all 8 of the classrooms in the building for religious education. Our church was bursting with new families. At coffee hour, someone I hadn't seen before walked up to me in a dress and a wig. And in low graveled voice asked me how welcoming we were to transgendered people. I was shocked and a little scared. Who was this person? I am not proud to admit that my first reaction was fear for my people and our children. I looked at her for a long moment and said "I don't think you would be welcome here". And with that she walked away and never came back. The most liberal church in town wouldn't even welcome her as she is. She didn't belong.

It has taken me a long time to come to grips with that moment. I now openly welcome and accept transgendered people but it has not been an easy transition. It has helped that my daughters have introduced me to their Trans friends. It has helped that the UUA is grappling with this issue so forcefully. It has helped that we offer a comprehensive sexuality curriculum to our middle schoolers that deals with these issues. It is helpful that the Rev. Debra Haffner who served this congregation as our community minister while founding the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. Debra, who now serves our congregation in Reston, VA, has done so much to us in gendered identities. But our journey towards truly welcoming others who are different among us is really just beginning. Who belongs? Not everyone who walks through our door.

I confess this to you because as the anti-racist scholar Ibrahim X. Kendhi reminds me, the disease of racism and all its intersectionalities of gender, age, sex and ablest discrimination, can only begin to be dealt with a confession. I confess to you that as a white cis gendered heterosexual middle class man, I have often fallen short of welcoming those who should be among us. And you have as well. We all have. Kendhi points out that there is really no such thing as a racist person, each person chooses either to be racist in how we support policies and practices that make us so, or we choose to be anti-racist. And that choice, as well as the choices we make regarding sex, gender, age, and class are choices we make continually. We must choose from moment to moment to be anti-racist, anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic, anti-patriarchal, anti-sexist, anti-ageist, anti-ablest. It is possible to be racist one moment, and then anti-racist the next. The point is that for us to truly welcome those who should belong here, we will need to sharpen our senses and open our minds to the systems and habits that make us less than welcoming. (see [How To Be a Anti-Racist](#), 2018)

I have a cartoon over my desk that lays out the path for this work. Three African American children, one tall, one of medium height and one small are trying to peer over the fence to see a baseball game. Only the tall one can see. In the next frame titled "Equality" three equal soapboxes are provided so now the tall one can see the game and

middle height child can see the game but the smallest child still can't see the game. In the next frame titled "Equity", there is no box for the tall child, one box for the midheight, and two boxes for the smallest child, so now all three can see the game! The final frame titled "Liberation", has the fence completely removed, so that there is no need for boxes at all. Can you see this with me?

Our work towards welcoming all has truly just begun. At our very best we strive for equality welcoming all as they are. But that isn't enough dear ones, not by a long shot. We strive for equity, which is why we are beginning to truly deal with our racism and truly deal with our transgender discrimination. It is why we renamed the team the Gender Equity Team. It is why we will be considering replacing the signs on our restrooms to make them more Transgender friendly. It is why our architects are seriously reconsidering ways to improve access to our buildings. It is why we beginning to experiment with family friendly worship, interactive worship and new screens and hearing assist technology. It is why Margalie is introducing the Intercultural Development Inventory so that we can examine our implicit bias, and racist tendencies as a means to be really who we dream to be. It is why I am asking those of you here today who are new to not just wait to be engaged but to take that first step. Coffee hour is not a great place to meet new people. We are not so much cliquish as we are human. People gravitate to those they know. If you are new, take the initiative to join a group, a choir, a small group, become a greeter. Get to know others and suddenly you won't be on the outside.

My ultimate goal, dear ones, is for us to achieve liberation – to remove the fence entirely. But, as Kendhi writes, along the way to liberation there must be pain. There will be the need for forgiveness as Yom Kippur reminds us, but first we must lament our shortcomings and try again and again with courage and humility. I lament my many failures to be as welcoming as I could be. I lament those who I have pushed away who were truly in need of ministering to. I lament how I have insulted people of color through my fear and not seeing them. I lament how I have dismissed people who serve me as a means to an end and not the end in and of themselves. I lament the hearts I have broken

with my rejection born of fear and ignorance. I lament and ask for forgiveness and promise to do better. I ask that you join me in that promise, in that work that we have yet to do in order that all may be liberated.

Let me close with this poem by Margaret Wolff:

“We sit together and I tell you things,
 Silent, unborn, naked things
 That only my God has heard me say.
 You do not cluck your tongue at me
 Or roll your eyes
 Or split my heart into a thousand pieces
 With words that have little to do with me.
 You do not turn away because you cannot bear to see
 Your own unclaimed light shining in my eyes.
 You stay with me in the dark.
 You urge me into being.
 You make room in your heart for my voice.
 You rejoice in my joy.
 And through it all, you stand unbound
 By everything but the still, small Voice within you.
 I see my future Self in you
 Just enough to risk
 Moving beyond the familiar,
 Just enough to leave
 The familiar in the past where it belongs.
 I breathe you in and I breathe you out
 In one luxurious and contented sigh.
 In sweet company
 I am home at last.”

■ By Margaret Wolff, In Sweet Company