

Homily—How Do You Love an Enemy, When the Enemy is Uncle Festus?

UUFM—February 14, 2021

When I prepared this Order of Service, I was not sure that I would have a sermon by Sunday. That is the way it is for me in these days, when I feel foggy from the weight of working during COVID, following a contested election and political unrest and an insurrection and an impeachment. When this fog swipes at me with cold wispy fingers as I learn to live with my father's death. I have felt such an outpouring of love from you, more cards and notes just yesterday. And I want you to know that they are such a gift to me. They help me to clear the fog more than I could do on my own.

And I am gratified that the Care and Connections Teams sent valentines to all our congregants living alone, reminding each person that when they are a part of UUFM, they are never truly alone.

One of the reasons why we seek religious community, it seems to me, it to learn to move through life when our hearts are broken, broken in so many ways and all the time. Thank you for helping me to hold my broken heart through the work that must be done. Please let me know when you see that I am not holding together as necessary to serve well the holy as expressed in your needs.

And, it turns out, I **do** have a whole sermon this morning.

Religious community helps us to move through life when our hearts are broken, and though our hearts are broken in personal ways, our hearts are also broken in more than personal ways as well, or they should be, in these days, they should be.

We explore in February the theme of "Beloved Community." Last week, Rev. Sollie introduced the idea of the "Complex Subjectivity" of people who have been systematically dehumanized, especially Black people. Next week and the week after, we will pick up on the supreme necessity of racial and ethnic inclusion in community, that Beloved Community is not possible without those who have been oppressed and marginalized, not possible unless those of us less marginalized and more privileged, purpose to change the way things are. What I introduce today is what I call a "heart-set," the heart-set that prepares us for the work of learning and acting that leads to healing. I say heart-set, and not mindset, because I feel sadly confident that I am much more able to **know** what is right than to **feel** and then to do what is right. I believe that I am not so different from many of you.

How do you love an enemy, when the enemy is Uncle Festus? Now, Uncle Festus isn't a real person. Uncle Festus is a combination of people in my life, people I care about, who hold views and express opinions that I find so abhorrent, views and opinions and sometimes accompanying actions, that hurt and that dehumanize other people I also love and care about. Many of us have an Uncle Festus in our lives. I invite you to substitute in your friend or relative as Uncle Festus as I speak this morning.

My Uncle Festus is a composite, made up of people I raised my children with, who sat together for countless family meals, who live in rural areas and fear the cities and those of us who live in them, who

How Do You Love an Enemy, When the Enemy is Uncle Festus--2

homeschooled their children rather than sending them to public school, precisely to avoid coming into contact with the kinds of people who attend public schools—poor people, black people, gender-nonconforming people, non-Christian people. Uncle Festus is certain that certain people are just lazy, have the wrong kinds of families, manifest the weakness of becoming addicts. Uncle Festus hates that certain people don't have the forethought or the discipline to save their money to buy a decent house in a good neighborhood, eat too much fast food and not enough vegetables, get fat from not exercising enough. Uncle Festus doesn't tolerate that certain people engage in sinful sexual behavior and dress in abominable ways or can't seem to speak clear English. Such people are simply a bad influence to be around. And such people probably have fallen out of the "Light of God" and so should be scorned and avoided lest their contamination spill over and infect Uncle Festus. Such people should be cast out or at least cast away.

Because we are family, before the last election, Uncle Festus and I still maintained some tacit connection, though it had been eroded by COVID as well as from falling on opposite sides of the political spectrum. By then, Uncle Festus openly named me and my family stupid and ignorant, called us communists, called us godless (as if that's necessarily a bad thing), held us as baby-killers and sinners, sinners bound for hellfire. All on Facebook mind you, all at a distance, lobbing threats and condemnation but none of us actually looking at each other, talking with each other.

But you know what I rarely did with Uncle Festus, on Facebook or in person? I rarely asked, "What makes you feel this way?" I rarely said, "Please tell me more about that." Abhorrent as I find them and still find them, my absence of curiosity about their views tells me I am much more interested in my own point of view and in defending it than knowing something about them and their point of view. My blood would boil, my anxiety would become so triggered by what I perceived as hateful language and attacks on people and ideas I cared about deeply. And in that reaction, I described my position, I expressed the narrative I have worked long to construct about my life and my values, I defended people in my life who live with marginalized identities. I proclaimed the narratives about family structures enforced by low wage overwork, about the beauty in a gender spectrum, about laws and regulations that prevent Black and Brown people from accessing money and building wealth in the same ways as white people can, about food deserts and food apartheid, about health conditions emerging from medical neglect and exploitation. I think Uncle Festus's narratives are wrong and hateful and that mine are correct and moral. I simply did not have any more interest in talking with Uncle Festus about their narratives than they apparently had in hearing about mine. They never asked me "What makes you feel this way?" either. So why would I want to open my ears to any of that garbage? And thus "garbage" begins to define not only Uncle Festus's ideas but Uncle Festus himself. By spouting garbage, Uncle Festus becomes to me . . . garbage.

Now that the political climate is shifting, the atmosphere less heated, less fraught, I want to know if it is possible to repair relationships with Uncle Festus. Uncle Festus is family, after all, and love of family should count for something in this broken world, shouldn't it? It is not that I suddenly think my narratives are incorrect and Uncle Festus's are correct. On the contrary, but don't I want to be able to share a meal together again, to delight in the growth of the grand nieces and nephews, to soothe the

aching hearts of the grandparents watching all the division within their family? Don't I want to look with less suspicion and judgment at my neighbors? When Uncle Festus's names people I care about as garbage, do I really want to be engaging in the same kind of thinking and labeling? Why is it so hard to love, even the people in my own family, let alone neighbors and strangers?

Here at UUFM, we have an amazing team of people, the Healing Our Democracy Action and Resources Team, people dedicated to learning how **we** all can learn how to work across the political divide, to find ways to overcome entrenched polarization. This dedicated group is in the process of learning themselves so that they can bring learning opportunities to the Fellowship and we can move forward as a body. I am excited about the opportunities and the specific actions called for. I am eager to know what it will take to heal our country.

And why heal? Why reach across to the other side? **Why?** Because we are called by our Unitarian Universalist faith to love. Because we are called to build what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. named Beloved Community. He said and I quote, "Our ultimate end must be reconciliation; the end must be redemption; the end must be the creation of the beloved community. We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization." Thus ends his words, and what good words they are.

Reconciliation and redemption. We know the power of these words, the goodness of them. We watched this morning a wordless manifestation of reconciliation, of actions changed. The Allegory of the Long Spoons teaches us to care for each other as a way to make the world good for all. No one of us can do without each other. Such a simple thing, surely so irrefutably true and beautiful. A world not hard at all to desire.

And yet often we behave more like the children in the story Macey offered this morning. When given the opportunity to be kind, "But most of us were silent." Heartbreaking. We seek sameness and reject difference. We want like-mindedness, fearing conflict and difference of opinion, as if differences are character flaws rather than circumstantial experience. Even demonizing the people who think and act differently from us. We turn away, talking about kindness rather than doing kindness, no stone in the water, no circles of understanding rippling outward.

Reconciliation and redemption carry heavy theological weight, more than what many of us are comfortable with. Yet, very simply, we must work to make the world good for all without demonizing those whose views we abhor. We must separate our hearts from hating those whose ideas we hate. We will not change this world, no matters our right thoughts alone. Ideas and practices that wound, that diminish human thriving, these must be overturned. Those who perpetuate systems of oppression and casual acts of violence and cruelty must be held accountable. And we must all work for these ends because we love. Even if we do not think ourselves oppressors because our values are right, we must be liberated of our hate. Because our own humanity is diminished with every hateful thought or word we direct at another human being. And diminished beings keep perpetuating, continue co-creating, a diminished world, much as we want a more beautiful one.

In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all... It begins by loving others for their sakes and makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends."

May we move together, friends, may we stand by each other, learning to love our enemies for themselves even as we work for true equity and fairness, even when the tumult of our times seems as "If the sky that we look upon/Should tumble and fall/Or the mountain should crumble to the sea." May we draw "together in a web of holy relationships," reminded, ignited, anchored, comforted, and inspired to move us to peace, compassion, and justice, opening us to neighbors, faith, and the work ahead with loving hands uniting us. And may you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."