The Postmodern Beloved Community

Sermon by

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May, 2010

Each year, the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, leads several 5-day retreats at various locations in New England and California, and in Estes Park, Colorado . They are pretty quiet affairs. We eat our meals in silence and maintain what is called "noble silence" following evening meditation until after breakfast. "Noble silence" means we can speak if necessary, but discourages chatter. But there is talking. Thich Nhat Hanh gives a 2-hour lecture every morning before breakfast, and we meet with the same group of about a dozen people every afternoon for discussion, facilitated by a member of the monastic order. These "dharma families," as they're called, tend to become close-knit communities over the course of the retreat.

Another thing we do is walking meditation. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches people to walk very slowly, paying close attention to their breath, the sensations in their bodies, their thoughts and feelings. He would say something like, "Walking meditation helps us regain our sovereignty, our liberty as a human being. We walk with grace and dignity, like an emperor, like a lion. Each step is life. Walk and touch peace every moment. Walk and touch happiness every moment. Kiss the Earth with your feet. Bring the Earth your love and happiness." From time to time during walking meditation he'd stop and sound a bell of mindfulness [ring bell, wait], and people would stop walking for a moment and pay extra special attention to their immediate perceptions, looking deeply into the miracle before them in the present moment. Then, after a few breaths, they would move on again.

He would also encourage people to practice walking meditation during their free time and as they went from place to place, so it wouldn't be unusual to see people walking around at different rates of speed. Some at a normal street pace, others looking almost like mimes moving in slow motion.

Some years ago there was a retreat at the University of California at Santa Barbara. It was a beautiful setting, right on the ocean with sandy beach and walking trail paralleling the shoreline. People enjoyed doing walking meditation on the trail, with the grandeur of nature's display adding to their practice.

But the beach was not theirs alone. There were bicyclists, too, who liked to use those same trails. As they approached a slowly walking figure, they would ring the bells on their handlebars. And the walkers, hearing a bell, would stop and stand still. And [bam!] the bicycle'd hit them. This actually happened a number of times before the word went out that they needed to be careful, that they were sharing those paths with people who had a different meaning for the sound of a bell than they did.

Different communities can have opposite meanings for the same things. The people at the retreat had a new meaning for the sound of a bell that was rooted in peace and tranquility and encouraged stillness, while the bicyclists naturally assumed that the sound

of a bell was an alarm warning of impending danger and the need to act quickly and defensively. Same sound, two very different meanings.

The people at the retreat were especially open to acquiring this new meaning for the sound of the bell because they were especially motivated to learn and change. This happens in a lot of contexts. Usually, the more we want to be part of a group, the more we're willing to be influenced by it.

I know wanted to fit it when I joined the wrestling team in high school. I worked hard and made the varsity squad in my freshman year. I enjoyed the sport but the culture of the team encouraged hostility. There was an intense kind of warrior camaraderie as we all strained to do our best in an extremely competitive environment. The game here was strictly zero-sum: winning meant that someone else had to lose. We were taught to despise our opponents, including the weaker members of our own team. We even mocked and ridiculed people who participated in other sports, as though wrestlers were the only real athletes. We built self-esteem out of violence, cruelty, and contempt and I learned to wear a sneer as a badge of honor.

I was active in the music program at the same time. Playing in the band and orchestra, singing in the choir, I experienced my first glimpses of the transcendent joy that is possible in community. When we were in the throes of creation, you could feel the positive energy crackle through the room. We worked every bit as hard as the wrestlers, but in collaboration instead of competition. At times there would be a whole room full of bright, trusting eyes meeting each other in a communion of joyful mutuality.

Over time, I realized that music made me feel better than wrestling. I didn't really want to be arrogant or superior; I wanted to be happy and connected. The problem may not have been the sport itself as much as the culture of the team I was on, shaped by the personality of the coach. On the other hand, our choir director taught music as a secular spiritual experience. The more we sang and performed, the more dedicated we were to our mutual well being and happiness. Though we may have been sullen and resentful teens in other contexts, here we gladly accepted the discipline of hard work and punctuality.

In my junior year I left the wrestling team for drama, where the spirit of cooperation and creativity created another joyous community of collaboration and mutuality that helped me to develop habits and skills for a more fulfilling life.

Membership in a community means being influenced by it. People are being influenced by their communities all the time in ways that change the nature and quality of their experience. And what is happening when the nature and quality of your experience are changing? YOU are changing. We are changing all the time. That is one of the things on which postmodern critical theory and Buddhism agree: there is no such thing as an impartial, objective observer. There is no permanent, unchanging self. We sense a continuity of identity, but if you think back over your life, many of your values, interests and behaviors have probably been very different from what they are now. You might well draw different conclusions from the same observations. You're still you, of course, but what it means to be you can be very different at various stages of your life.

The bicycle bells of Santa Barbara also teach us that we're defenseless against what we don't believe in. The walkers couldn't protect themselves from the bicycles because

they didn't believe their bells signaled a threat. They were walking in a cocoon of security so strong that they were unaware of their vulnerability.

This vulnerability is widespread in our culture. Lacking an appreciation of how our communities change us, we often can't hear the difference between mindfulness and bicycle bells.

Most of us can recall feeling like being hit by a bicycle when we first realized that our communities weren't always as benign as we'd believed. Perhaps some trusted institution – our school or church or political party – was trying to shape us in ways we didn't want to go. Maybe it was our parents. This disillusionment can lead to the adolescent rebellion against authority that's a popular right of passage in our culture. But this rebellion against authority can only go so far. We eventually need to create something else that will displace the old. Anger is not creative; it can only destroy. Only love is truly creative. If we believe that the greatest fulfillment can be found in wonder, joy, and peace; if we want a world governed by wholeness, of kindness, justice, compassion and love, we have to live those values.

If we want new values, we need new communities. There is nowhere to go where we can escape from social forces; we can only choose which ones to influence us. We can't stop ourselves from changing, but we can try to make choices that will lead to changes that will be likely to increase our happiness. We can do this by choosing to belong to a community that is committed to embodying our highest values and helps us to grow toward their fulfillment. This can be hard to do in our postmodern world where it's not easy to evaluate which groups are good and useful. The unchanging truths of tradition have been shaken by the realization that everything changes, even truth. The world has become a marketplace of competing interests, voices and communities, fighting for our allegiance.

The way to achieve this in a multicultural society is to find our way to some kind of overarching values; something that can bring us together that is beyond the advocacy of any single tradition or agenda.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used the Christian theology of love as both motivation and discipline for the civil rights movement. He knew that only love could create a program where, as he said, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community." King's beloved community is a global vision of a time when all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the beloved community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. An all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood will replace racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice. Dr. King didn't believe in a naïve utopia where love would eliminate all conflict. He knew that lions would be lions and lambs would be lambs. But he believed that a community based in the transforming power of the discipline of love could, over time, change people's behavior and eventually their hearts as well.

Dr. King described this love as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," "the love of God operating in the human heart." He said that "it does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people . . . it begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both . . . This is love seeking to preserve and create community." Doesn't it sound like

he's talking about our first Unitarian Universalist principle, affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person? Yes, but he's also showing us that we need to go beyond merely affirming and promoting, that we actually need to love every person. Love your neighbor – it was revolutionary 2000 years ago, and it's still pretty hard to actually do today.

Sometimes Unitarian Universalists think that philosophical or political activism can create a world of harmony and justice. But Dr. King's vision isn't one of mere activism. It takes the central claim of every religion and places it squarely in the midst of community life. He knew that love isn't something that we can angrily demand of others without doing the hard work of embodying it ourselves.

If we want to live in a world of love, we ourselves have to be loving. If we want to be loving, we need to create a community that will teach us how, that will help us integrate practices of forgiveness, kindness and compassion into our habitual responses. Such a community would be an incubator for the birth of a transformed world.

It's often our proud certainty of being right that prevents us from being loving. The fruit of our adolescent revolt was the creation of ourselves as independent, autonomous entities. But now that achievement can be the very thing that makes it hard for us to join a group and allow it to shape us for the better. Even if we understand intellectually that we're neither independent nor autonomous, we find it hard to put this understanding into practice. This is why so many religions have the idea of death and rebirth at their center. We need to be willing to let go of the person we are in order to be the person we are becoming. This is why religious traditions say things like, "Those who would save to their life will lose it," and "You must be born again." Or, as Bob Dylan put it, "All those not busy being born are busy dying."

The beloved community is the antidote to a world torn apart by competing interests and ideologies. We can't go back to a time when there was only one truth, as religious fundamentalists would like, whatever their tradition. When we realize that the common commandment of all religions is, ultimately, "Love one another," we can build a worldwide beloved community despite our differences.

This kind of love is not primarily something you feel; it is something you do. One of the special things about attending a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh is what happens to you when you spend day after day among people of common purpose devoted to cultivating peace and good will through deep listening and compassionate speech. You lose all your justification for social anxiety. You gradually become more peaceful and at ease. You know how good it feels when people give you attention, affection, and approval? It helps you feel good about yourself. But there is a price to pay, a discipline to accept. You have to honor the uniquely profound gift each person is to the world. You learn to listen with your whole being. the impact of your speech on others and try to choose words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. And when disagreements do arise, make every effort to resolve them with clarity and respect.

Do you remember the bells of Santa Barbara? How they had opposite meanings, danger and alarm as well as peace and serenity? We can see people in opposite ways, too. You know how dangerous and bad it feels when you see someone approaching who you know is angry and you know things are going to go badly? You also know how safe and good it feels the instant you see someone you know to be kind and loving and that things

are going to go well. Just like the bells of Santa Barbara, we can embody opposite meanings. We can be bells of danger to one another, or we can be bells of mindfulness [invite. . .], helping each other to live in peace and joy.

A community that practices the discipline of love can create true sanctuary where all are safe to learn, grow, and discover the path to their greatest fulfillment. This is the gift we can give to ourselves, to each other, and to the whole world.