

So, it is the Minnesota UCC Conference Annual Meeting weekend. Pastor Howard is at the meeting and Molly is preaching at another church, which is why I am up here. As at least some of you know, on Annual Meeting weekend the Conference sends out a service churches can use while their pastor is gone. This year, they sent the service, but instead of a sermon they sent bullet points. That is not a good idea with me – I tend to go off in my own direction when given such vague instructions. So here goes.

The Conference's Annual Meeting theme this year is "Diving Deeper: Race, Class and Faith." The focus is on addressing systemic racism and classism in our society in order to create the world of transformative love and belonging that Christ teaches. But before we can address these systemic issues, we have to recognize that there is a system and our place in it, that the social order that we live and work in every day is a human construct created by society and history and not a law of nature. As one of the Conference bullet points puts it:

"In our work around questions of race and class, it is important to note our current "social location." How much power do we hold due to our race and class? What about our gender, gender identity, physical ability or sexual orientation? ... [W]orking on questions of racism and classism requires of us a clear sense of our own power – as individuals and as communities. Do we hold white racial privilege? Do we hold class privilege?"

When I was in college, I read a book called Women's Reality by Anne Wilson Schaef. Anne Wilson Shaef is a clinical psychologist who was doing therapy in the 1960's and finding that a lot of her training didn't seem to apply to, or help, her female patients. After several years of research, she wrote this book which describes the different realities men and women experience in what she labels our White Male System. She goes on to talk about how difficult it is for people from the dominant group, in this case white males, to recognize and understand the different realities experienced by those who are not automatically part of the dominant system. It's not that white men in general are consciously trying to ignore the different experiences of women or people of color. It is that as a member of the dominant group, you simply don't have the personal experience of what it is like to not be in the dominant group. It is like being right-handed. In our world, people who are right-handed are a dominant group. I am right-handed and for most of my life I never even thought about things like golf clubs or where to sit when going out to dinner. My husband, on the other hand, is left-handed, and I have learned over the years that it is important for him to sit on a corner where there are no other people on his left. Otherwise, he spends more energy trying not to bump elbows with the person next to him than he does eating or socializing.

The point is that every individual's life experiences are different but, paraphrasing George Orwell, some are more different than others. Shaef writes:

“One part of psychology is the science of individual differences. Whole fields of study have developed out of the awareness that when two or more persons observe the same event, they are apt to come up with two or more different reports of it.”

If two people with similar life experiences and social standing can interpret the same event completely differently, how much more likely is it that people who have very different life experiences and social standing will interpret things differently?

So how do we bridge that gap? How do we get to a place where we can have a real conversation about racism, classism, sexism, or any other issue in our society where some are more powerful than others – not through any fault of their own but by the simple accident of birth? And that IS what it is. As Lorelle Saxena put it (again, from the Conference's bullet points),

“There is no reason ... why I deserve shelter, food, stability, safety, health or your regard any more than any given Syrian refugee. ... My home, my education, my business: the way I look, the way I talk; the fact that I come home to a safe, whole, healthy family every day – every one of those things is a privilege that I fell into by the random circumstance of being born in this country to parents who valued academic achievement. I, or you, could have just as easily been born in Syria, or Burkina Faso, or Afghanistan.

...

“And no, that is not your fault. But that’s not the same as it not being our responsibility.”

I think in order to address these issues, we first have to learn how to listen, really listen. The only way any of us are going to understand what it is like to be a Syrian refugee, or a person of color or a transgender person, or anything we ourselves are not, is to make space in our hearts and our heads and actually listen to what people who live those realities tell us. Because their experience of the world, the world we all share every day, is not the same as yours and mine. And we need to be willing to listen to the stories of others whose experiences are not the same as ours, and to really hear them.

That involves learning to communicate, and listen, effectively. (And that is a skill I, certainly, could improve on. I’m guessing that I’m not alone.) The Letter of James (1:19), says: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” That means really trying to hear and understand what the other person is saying. There are literally millions of websites devoted to the topic of effective communication, -- when I googled it I got more than 49,000,000 hits -- but mostly they can be boiled down to what Janet and I did in the final round of the children’s sermon skit with the kids: listen, repeat back to make sure you have

got it, ask questions to clarify, continue until the speaker confirms the message is understood.

If you are like me, we often spend communication time thinking about what we want to communicate rather than what the other person is saying. I

quote from “Listening to Each Other” by Michael Lane, Executive Director of Delve Christian Ministries:

“We are rarely listening; usually, we are just waiting impatiently for our turn to talk. We nod and agree in all the right places, but really we are pondering the next thing we are about to say. ... If you struggle with this as much as I do, then it ought to be very humbling when you realize just how difficult and rare it is to have a conversation with someone during which you are far more interested in what they are saying than what you are about to say. It’s hard to clear our mind, offer our undivided attention and just listen.”

But that is what we need to do – with each other and with the wider world – just listen – and try to really hear. It is not a new problem. James says in his Letter,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (James 1:22)

But to reach the world of transformative love we as Christians strive for, we first need to receive the testimony of our fellow travelers here on earth. If we can't hear real people who are talking to us, how are we going to hear God, who tends, in my experience, to speak much more softly.

I keep thinking about an editorial I read in Tuesday's Star Tribune. It quoted Mitch McConnell as saying, about Donald Trump, "We are all behind him. ... I just hope he changes direction." That struck me as a very odd thing to say. But then, it occurred to me that that is essentially what Peter did in our text and what we all do in our everyday lives. Peter asked Jesus to command him to walk on water, and then was overcome by his life experiences that told him what he was doing was impossible. He forgot to keep listening to Jesus and instead imposed his own reality on the situation. He would have drowned if Jesus had not saved him.

I, too, do that a lot with Jesus, and I'm guessing I'm not alone. I want to follow Jesus, but I just hope he changes direction to lead me somewhere it is easy to follow. Listening to those who do not experience our society the way I do is not easy – it is hard. But that is what Jesus commands – for us to care for the orphans and widows, to champion the oppressed. Or, as James puts it, "Be doers

of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (James 1:22) May God give us strength and wisdom to truly listen to others, to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. And may God lead us to a place where we are a blessing to each other and to the world around us. Amen