

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT - 5
OPENING OUR HEART TO THE STRANGER

(08/21/16)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 10:25-37

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36)

How many of you have been watching the Olympics? I think they’re truly inspiring. Every two years, athletes from around the world step apart from the conflicts that their political leaders have created and gather together to compete in their athletic events. As I watch these kids compete I find myself thinking, “To be honest, I couldn’t do that when I was his/her age.” To be perfectly honest, I also can’t do it now.

I always aspired to be an Olympic athlete, to win a gold medal. However, I have been unable to overcome two obstacles. First, I never found my sport and I am beginning to entertain the possibility that it does not yet exist. Second, I have a strong aversion to breaking a sweat or exerting myself past the point of comfort. These two factors have proved to be major obstacles in the realization of my childhood hopes and dreams.

The Olympics brings us all together in a positive way. In a time of increasing nationalism it is important to be conscious of and to hold up that which we have in common. We are all human beings, all inhabitants of this green-blue rotating orb. We’re all in this together. It doesn’t matter whether you hail from Russia or the United States, if you raise the heaviest weight above your head in the clean and jerk, or if you swim the 400 m butterfly in the fastest time, you win the contest.

I have become aware of a certain pattern in the athletes for whom I root. Katie Ladecky, Michael Phelps, Simone Biles, and Aly Raisman are all Americans. I root for the United States teams when they compete. Even though I know how stupid it is to say that I am “proud” of these athletes, since I had nothing to do with their accomplishments, I confess a certain pleasure in checking the total medal count and noting that “we” are considerably ahead of every other nation. I, like many others around the world, divide the teams into two categories: us and the rest of the world.

There have been some touching examples of crossing the nationalistic divide in these Olympics. When Abbey D’Agostino, who is from Topsfield, accidentally collided with Nikki Hamblin of New Zealand in the woman’s 5,000 meters, they both fell to the

ground. Abbey, whose foot was injured in the fall, helped Nikki to her feet and encouraged her to finish the race. Then Nikki ran with Abbey for a while to encourage her and waited for her at the finish line. That stands in contrast to the Egyptian athlete who, after losing his judo match to an Israeli, refused to bow to his opponent.

This is also the first time that the Olympics have fielded an independent team comprised solely of refugees. These athletes, most of who have been displaced from their homelands in Africa, don't have a country to call their own. I doubt if any of them participated in the finals of any event. It is difficult to train when you have no training facility, no support from your government, and when for the past few years you have been mostly running for your life. As one of them said, "We are human beings, too."

Indeed they are. They are human beings with the same hopes and dreams that we have. They just have a lot less opportunity. They have a *lot* less opportunity.

This summer we have been looking at the armor that we have consciously or unconsciously constructed to keep us from being hurt by other people and by life. Our elaborate system of defenses prevents us from experiencing intimacy and love; it isolates us from other human beings, even those who love us. This armor prevents us from individuating, from becoming the unique individuals that God wants and intends us to be.

This sense of being threatened by anything or anyone who is different from us is archetypal. It is hard wired into our psyche. In the collective unconscious, the repository of patterns of living that go back hundreds of thousands if not millions of years, we are hard wired to fear "the stranger," to fear anyone or anything that is different--unless we are strong enough not to be threatened by them.

We have inherited the belief that different is dangerous. We instinctively fear that which is alien to us. This finely tuned radar to "stranger danger" served an adaptive function in evolution; it kept early human beings from being killed. Those who were conditioned to avoid anything strange or different had a better chance of surviving, and would then pass on this genetic tendency to their offspring.

However, we are reaching a stage in the development in the evolution of nations and cultures where this tendency to divide the world into "us" and "them" is beginning to work against us. When I look at the politics of our country and around the world, I am afraid that this tribal way of looking at life will be ultimately be the death of all of us.

Take the example of snakes. The fear of snakes is relatively universal, even in places where there are no poisonous snakes. I suspect that most of us would immediately recoil from an encounter with a garter snake or milk snake. Milk snakes, by the way, are really pretty. I know what you're saying (because I can read lips): "I don't care."

Every semester I show a video to one of my classes at Assumption College. The video, which is about Albert Bandura, one of the founders of cognitive behavioral therapy, illustrates how CBT can help us overcome anxiety. In the video a young woman is trying to overcome a fear of snakes. I'm not sure why she is trying to do this when it is a lot easier to avoid them. But she is determined to do this. Her therapist, a woman who is trained in CBT, is helping her get over her fear.

The therapist sets up a hierarchy of exposures. Exposures are planned encounters with the feared object. Instead of moving away from the source of anxiety, CBT encourages us to move toward it. In passing I would like to note that Buddhism taught this approach to that which is feared over 2,500 years ago. I mentioned it several weeks ago when I gave the example of how the Buddhist sage Milarepa dealt with the demons that had infested his hut. When all else failed, Milarepa invited the demons to sit down and have tea with him. When he did this all the demons dissolved.

The therapist first had the young woman look at pictures of snakes until she could do so without being overly anxious. Then she invited the woman to view from a safe distance a snake that was safely ensconced within a terrarium. Over time the woman found herself able to sit closer to the snake. Then, with her hand wrapped in a thermal mitten, like the kind you use to take a hot casserole out of the oven, she was able to touch the snake. Finally she was able to touch the snake with her bare hands and then to hold it. In a short period of time she became quite comfortable and playful with it. I think the whole process took no more than 6-8 sessions.

I think this video shows us how we can overcome our fear of anyone who is different from us. We need to spend time with them; we need to get to know them. The cognitive side of cognitive behavioral therapy tells us that we can overcome many of our fears by seeing through our false core beliefs. The behavioral side maintains that the exposures, the behavioral encounters with the feared object, play an important role in

reducing the anxiety. Both the cognitive and the behavioral pieces are important. And if we can do this with snakes, we can do this with human beings who are different from us.

When I was a student at Andover Newton Theological School, William Stringfellow, the American lay theologian, lawyer, and social activist, was invited to give a lecture. In his lecture Stringfellow stated his belief that prejudice could be overcome through education. I remember being unconvinced. I was skeptical that whites could overcome their prejudices against blacks (and vice versa) by being taught that we are all equal.

I believe that we change through experience, especially through relationships. Because of this I was a supporter of forced busing to integrate the Boston schools. I believed that if little white children could be friends with little black children, with little Latino and Asian children while they were in kindergarten, their personal experiences would counter the garbage that would be taught to them by their culture. But I was in the minority; most people thought that the busing program was a costly mistake.

Think of the walls that divide us, that lead us to see the other, the stranger as alien and hence as dangerous. In my own life, I am aware of the prejudices that shaped how I saw other people and also the difficult process of overcoming these prejudices. The dichotomy of white and black began to dissolve through my experience in Selma--living in the black community, being jailed for demonstrating, and participating in the march. My freshman year in high school, when I lived in California, my three closest friends were of African, Japanese, and Mexican descent. This would not have been possible in Danvers, the town where I grew up. If I had never been exposed to people of other races and ethnic groups, I have no idea how my prejudices would have been challenged.

The same is true of sexual orientation. As a heterosexual, I grew up with a prejudice against homosexuals. My awareness of what science and psychology say about the complex matter of sexual orientation was helpful in dissolving this prejudice, but far more important has been my colleagues, clients, students, parishioners and friends who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans. Because of my personal experience of some beautiful human beings whose sexual orientation is different from mine, I have little tolerance for religious colleagues who preach that homosexuals are living in sin. The pain that this has caused so many beautiful human beings is beyond anything I can grasp.

Our world is becoming increasingly sectarian. Far too many people want to live only with “their own kind,” whatever that means. Tribalism is the shadow of the populist movement in our country, in Europe, and around the world. Our nationalistic or religious fervor prevents us from grasping that which unites us, our common heritage as human beings, the fact that we are all members of a single race—the human race. Isolationism, which is bred in fear of the other, is doomed to failure both socially and economically. If you don’t believe this, take a look at North Korea.

In a conversation following last Sunday’s service, Jon mentioned that we have to *want* to take down the walls that divide us, the armor that suffocates us, to begin the journey. I totally agree. We have to want to move past tribal ways of thinking to perceive and embrace our common humanity. This takes courage. It is easier to build a wall than to take it down. But our only hope for survival lies in our ability to enter into a relationship with, to understand, to respect, and to genuinely care about the other. There is no other way.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus removes a brick from the wall that separates the Jew from the Samaritan. Jesus took down a lot of walls in his teaching and in his life. He took down the wall between heaven and earth, between life and death. In allowing himself to be touched by a woman who was menstruating, he dissolved the dichotomy between clean and unclean. He not only ate with tax collectors, he invited one to be his disciple. In allowing a “woman of the city” to wash his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair, he dissolved the prevailing beliefs about what it meant to be religious. He reached out to lepers. He taught us that those who we commonly regard as our enemy might prove to be more of a neighbor than those who are “of our own kind.”

In closing, I would like us to reflect on the words of a modern hymn, a hymn about citizenship, about enlightened patriotism, about an enlightened love for this wonderful country of ours. It is entitled *This Is My Song*.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

Something there is that doesn't love a wall. Something there is that wants us to tear down the wall between us and the stranger: between man and woman, black and white, citizen and immigrant, gay and straight, Christian and Muslim. That something, that someone who would help us to tear down these walls, is Jesus.

If we can let Jesus help us do this; if we can let him help us overcome our fear of the stranger, of the alien; if we can follow his example and take off our armor, making ourselves vulnerable; if we can open our minds and our hearts and let his teachings enter through our soft spot, leading us into that deeper level where we are all one, where we are all interconnected, where we are all children of God, *where we are all God*, our hearts will be enlightened.

Then we will not only find the peace that comes to those who dwell in the kingdom of God, we will be able to create the kingdom of God as a living reality in our world.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
August 21, 2016*