

Rev. Dr. Wendy von Courter
October 28, 2018
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes

All good people.

And so the women came to Solomon, each certain in their position. Each claiming with veracity that their truth was the truth. Solomon, it is told, was a man of great wisdom. The Hebrew Bible tells us that God came to him in a dream offering him a gift for his sacrifices to God. He asked for wisdom. The sacred text tells of a God who granted him such because he did not ask for self-serving rewards such as wealth or the death of his enemies.

Recall the story:

Two women are living in the same house and both have given birth. But one baby died in the night. One said, “my son is the living one, and your son is the dead one!” But the first woman was saying: “No, your son is the dead one, and my son is the living one.” That is how they argued before the king. ²³ Finally the king said: “This one says, ‘This is my son, the living one, and your son is the dead one!’ and that one says, ‘No, your son is the dead one, and my son is the living one!’ ” ²⁴ The king said: “Bring me a sword.” So they brought a sword to the king. ²⁵ The king then said: “Cut the living child in two, and give half to one woman and half to the other.” ²⁶ At once the woman whose son was the living one pleaded with the king, for her compassions were stirred toward her son. She said: “Please, my lord! You should give her the living child! By no means put him to death!” But the other woman was saying: “He will be neither mine nor yours! Let them cut him in two!” ²⁷ At that the king answered: “Give the living child to the first woman! By no means put him to death, for she is his mother.”

Thus ends the story.

Stories of disagreements have existed for all time. We began with the story of God’s hat, written in our time by a UU minister, and now this ancient text, written in later years but attributed to King Solomon who ruled in the mid-900s BCE. Disagreement is part of the human condition.

The words, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them,” found in Matthew 18:20, always come to mind when I think about disagreement. And I’m not a theist, rather a religious humanist who follows Jesus as a great teacher, and the sacred texts two of many books full of wisdom, contradictions, and food for thought – deep thought.

This line comes to mind because throughout my ministry and life, and I’ve found it to be the case, that where two or three are gathered, there will be difference of opinion. If two are gathered, two different opinions. If three, three. If any one of them is a Unitarian Universalist, multiply by two. And mix well. And perhaps stand or roll back.

And that, friends, is the great beauty of our faith. That we are able to disagree. Though not always gracefully. That we are able to change our minds. That as a 12-year old girl transfixed by the images of the Me-Lei massacre on the cover of *Life Magazine*, I was able to be a theist one day and a humanist the next, and still my faith community claimed me and I claimed it. I was among people who disagreed when I was a theist. And those who disagreed when I became a humanist. By definition we arrive with differing, often strong beliefs.

What I wish we did more of was share them. But we're far better at celebrating diversity of opinion than engaging with each other in those areas we disagree.

There's a wonderful man in my congregation. His name is Jack. His spiritual guide's name is Orion. Jack tells me, and others, that he and the spirit Orion have regular conversations and Orion exerts some control in Jack's life by sharing his opinions on what Jack should do. Jack also believes in reincarnation. Jack's beliefs are very different than my own. As a religious humanist, I believe that the life I'm in is the only one my spirit will inhabit and that the forces that move the world are either from nature or our heads, hearts and hands. I experience the divine in Creation and in the connection between all living things.

Jack and I disagree. But what we've learned to do is lean into one another's experience and say, "Tell me more. Tell me more about how your beliefs inform your life today. Tell me more about how they help you make sense of our larger world. Tell me more about how they travel with you through conflict and despair – or joy and elation. Tell me more." And that, friends, has made all the difference.

In the very space of our disagreement we've grown, not toward each other's theology, but within our own. Let me take you back in time a bit – not to the times of King Solomon, but about a decade ago at our annual General Assemblies – our GAs where UU delegates from all over gather.

It's a longer story than we have time for, but it's an important one and formative in bringing you this morning's message about disagreement. So for now, suffice to say that there were some events that led to the creation of what was called the Task Force on Cultural Misappropriation. Many, many people looked to this group to come out with a set of rules that, once followed, would prevent disagreement, in particular about hymns. You see, the group has formed in response to a particular incident that caused a great deal of pain for our People of Color. A hymn with profound meaning in South Africa during times of apartheid had been experienced by them as disrespectful on the GA stage.

The group included musicians involved in the presentation, People of Color, our Moderator, members of our GA Planning Committee, and white allies. There was much silence. There were tears. There were stories. There was singing. What there wasn't was the one thing so many people were waiting for ---- give us a rule book. Tell us, please what hymns to never sing so we don't cause this pain.

That didn't happen. Because it couldn't. Because it shouldn't.

What did emerge out of that group, after the silence, the tears, the stories, and the singing was a commitment to right relationships. The group recognized that we do not all experience things the same way. We do not always agree. So what we need to focus on is the space we create to hold that disagreement, or more importantly to hold one another.

The group changed its name to the Council on Cross Cultural Engagement, developed some best practices around hymn selection, hymn contextualization, and the Right Relationships Team was birthed. The team was unique in UU structures --- It was autonomous which made some people nervous right away. Well what are they going to do? How are they going to do it? Will we get to preview and/or approve what they say each day on that great big stage in front of thousands of UUs?

NO. A team leader, a young adult, was selected by the Moderator to design the team and told, "Invite whomever you need." A group of 30 met, coming from all the various groups – People of Color, Allies, Musicians, Youth, Young Adult, People living with Disabilities, clergy and laity. The team for the next GA was selected. They began the GA with an invitation to those thousands of UUs to sign a covenant of right relationships. And then people were told to come and see us if they experienced oppression. Each time, the team would sort out whether the person coming to them 1) just had their own stuff to deal with and would benefit from time with a chaplain, or 2) if the person needed encouragement or support to speak directly to the person or people involved or 3) if systemic oppression was in play.

An example of the first might have been someone very upset about a speaker in a workshop but, once heard, it was clear that their disagreement was mostly flavored by other events in that person's life. They were referred to a chaplain. An example of the second was a person upset that Unitarianism was being held up more than Universalism in a particular presentation. In that instance, and in many others, the RRT would encourage the person to speak directly with those involved and offer support in doing so if that was needed. An example in the final category was the fact that people using wheelchairs and scooters for mobility were having a lot of problems. And it wasn't new to them. They had to wait for elevators because seemingly able-body people were using them. People in the crowded hallways would stop short in front of them. People were petting service dogs despite being asked not to.

When something like this was identified – a systemic issue that was larger than any one person's concern – the Right Relations Team took it to the GA stage. Key to their model was that people involved were spoken to and listened to, before this happened. But then, the presentation by the RRT was specific. There was no mistaking who was involved and what steps towards wholeness would follow.

The specificity of the Right Relationships model was key. It was in creating a space in which the actual event could be named that healing, clarity, and the possibility of transformation occurred. It was and remains a piece that is missing too often in our disagreements large and small.

Contrast "We hope everyone will be more aware of the impact of their movements on others and other people's needs" vs. "Please stop using the elevators if you don't need to because people who need to aren't able to get to their workshops. And Don't Pet service dogs. No matter how much dogs like you and you think it's okay, it's not. They are working."

This call to specificity, with kindness, was the great gift from that first group who sat silently, shared tears and stories, and sang. They offered us this gift. How to create the sacred space that can hold our disagreements and hold each of us.

The story of the Right Relations Team is rich and long, but I want to bring us back to congregational life because their model can help us on our journey toward creating the Beloved Community we profess to seek. And I understand that's a focus for this congregation.

Just as the Council on Cross Cultural Engagement could not produce a rulebook, neither can we in congregational life. Stuff happens. Just last month, in my congregation where we have a strong history and commitment to right relationships, we had a heck of a mess.

It started with a tree.

After consulting with two trusted companies, including one named Save a Tree, the building and grounds folks determined that a dying Black Walnut had to go. A congregational meeting was necessary to authorize funds. No debate was expected. The meeting began. A presentation was made, and then suddenly someone said, "Call the question." Before the brand new board president gets to respond, someone yells – yes, yells at her – to call for yay votes, then nays. The congregation, mostly not noticing that two people wanted to say something, votes to do so. The vote to move the funds follows and bam, it's done. Most people head out happy to get on with their day.

The two people who wanted to discuss it believed the tree should be saved. They had even baked walnut bread. They left angry, but more importantly unheard.

Whenever two of more gather ... we should have remembered those words.

Now clearly it would have been helpful if those who disagreed had been more public in that disagreement. Had that disagreement surfaced earlier, questions would have been asked and answered by those most in the know, and, importantly, those with the gavel in hand at the meeting. There still would have been disagreement in the sanctuary but the container for that disagreement would have existed. They may still have left angry. But they would not have left unheard.

Many, many emails, texts, conversations, and meetings have taken place since then and this one mantra: "All good people."

"All good people," or you might say our first principle, is large enough to hold those who maintain a stance of "if the tree goes so do we" and it reminds them that the door is always open. "All good people" can hold the person who was so eager to move along that she yelled, "Call the question." "All good people" can hold the person who lost hold of their best self and started barking orders at the president. And "All good people" can hold the congregation who voted to end discussion.

But most importantly, "All good people" and a commitment to right relationships is what drove the actions that followed:

- Public acknowledgement of a messy process in which all good people acted and many felt harmed.
- A change in process so that a premature shutting down of discussion cannot occur.

- Outreach to all those harmed by our imperfect systems and imperfect selves: those who wanted to save the tree, those who felt they were perhaps seen as tree killers, those who moved to end the meeting without discussion, those who were confused by the whole thing, and to her credit a board president who didn't run away screaming, "Why did I ever volunteer to be president."
- Healing in the form of blessing the tree, thanking it for its contributions and using some of the wood to make this year's holiday ornament.

-
We at UUCM are not perfect. But we're clear that we will disagree and that what we need to hold most dear is how we will move through those moments. And on this morning, I offer our experience to you as you move forward in your goals to cultivate kindness and mutual respect in your community.

Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

I close with: If there's a single phrase that will serve you well in the hard work of creating Beloved Community - it is "All Good People."

May it serve you as well.