

## ***Beyond Tolerance***

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*We don't simply tolerate each other;  
We ask and tell; we don't just look away.  
We give attention to every bud and blossom.  
Let every face come grace the grand bouquet.*  
—from "A Dazzling Bouquet," by Bret Hesla

*The quickest way to lose your humanity is to tolerate the intolerable.*  
—William Sloane Coffin

Reading: Philippians 2:1-4, 14-16

After his brutal beating at the hands of the Los Angeles police and the following riots, Rodney King's now famous words reverberated around the country: "Can't we just get along?"

Today, I want to talk about this virtue we call "tolerance." God only knows how we could use a little more respect, a little more tolerance in our world so that we can get along together.

Each generation struggles with its own prejudice, bigotry and intolerance. Native Americans, who survived the horrors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its broken treaties, forced resettlements, and widespread genocide, find themselves marginalized on the remote reservations with the nation's highest rates of depression, alcoholism and suicide. The intolerance that was to be exhibited toward Native Americans was written into the language of the First Article of the United States Constitution, which declared that "Indians were not to be counted."

In the same constitutional clause it was stated that African Americans were to be counted as "three-fifths of a person." For more than 240 years Africans in North America were tolerated only as slaves. Whites did not tolerate their culture, their humanity or their aspirations for freedom.

The voices of every religious tradition cry out and challenge each generation to respect the differences of others and to work for the human dignity of all.

Someone has pointed out to me that the Qur'an teaches us that the world started out as one and will end as one, with *one single soul called humanity*. And in the Qur'an it is written:

*Do you not know, O People, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other?*

Can't we all just get along? From a religious perspective, this would seem that this is the least we could do: not to fear but to *know* each other.

There is a story of a Greek Orthodox bishop who was asked by an inquiring seminarian, "How can we love our *enemies* when most of the time we don't even respond to *love* with love?" The bishop responded, "My son, if you cannot love your enemy, hate him a little less every day."

It would seem like the least we can do. If we cannot love the other, at least do not hate. This is probably a good definition of tolerance: *not hating the other*. It is not so much a positive as it is the *absence of a negative*.

Tolerance is good, of course. This seems plainly obvious to liberals, like me. But you know, tolerance also has its limitations. It's unfortunate that something so basic needs to be held up as a high virtue.

Look, tolerance is a step in the right direction. But let's not mistake the first step on a long journey for the entire journey.

Tolerance is great, but it will never produce community. No, this only happens when persons *take each other seriously*, when there is truly a give and take, when people actually know each other. It is only through mutual understanding that we arrive at community.

The best image of tolerance I know is that of the nursery. Have you ever watched a group of one and two year-olds playing? Sometimes they run into each other or take away each others' toys, but for the most part at this stage of their development they usually just play independently—side by side. They tolerate each other. Their code is: "If you don't bother me, I won't bother you." Obviously, this is not the ultimate goal for a community. Such a model is a mere collection of parts that is able to accomplish very little, if anything at all, as a whole.

Someone—I don't remember who—put it like this:

*Tolerance is certainly preferable to people killing each other, but it is not a way of life that leads to mutual enrichment and appreciation. Tolerance keeps the world from exploding, but it does not transfigure the world... Tolerance keeps us related as occupants of the same planet, but it does not reconcile us as brothers and sister of the human race.*

Now, when we look to Jesus, what do we see? Well, there is a mixture of both tolerance and intolerance, isn't there? Jesus displayed an openness to women,

to outsiders, aliens and Samaritans, to tax collectors, to lepers, to the poor, and sinners” that provocatively challenged the bigotry and intolerance of his society. Yes, Jesus was tolerant, but first and foremost, he was passionate and zealous for compassion and justice.

Tolerance, you see, is not always a virtue. Sometimes it is an excuse for inaction and an avoidance of conflict. The path of Jesus does not tolerate hatred and bigotry. It does not tolerate meanness and destructive behavior. It does not tolerate intolerance!

As William Sloane Coffin once said, “The quickest way to lose your humanity is to tolerate the intolerable.”

And Jesus, the true Human One, was completely intolerant of systemic injustice as well as those who perpetuated it. His battle with the money changers is a good example. Anybody who has ever changed currencies at an airport understands the basic principles behind money changing. The money changer makes money whether buying or selling. The person changing the money loses whether buying or selling. At the Temple in Jerusalem it was totally unnecessary—it was an artificially created transaction that took money away from those making the pilgrimage to the Temple. That was the kind of systemic injustice that made Jesus lose his temper and throw the tables over.

In the same way, many of the rules and regulations created by the scribes and Pharisees created systemic injustices, artificially and unnecessarily burdening the people. Jesus launched into harsh diatribes against them according to Matthew, each one beginning with the phrase, “Woe to you, hypocrites...” *Jesus refused to tolerate the intolerable.* He would not let the misuse of religion go unchallenged.

Jesus moved beyond toleration in another important way, too: the way of *forgiveness*. This reminds me of what Desmond Tutu said once about the process for reconciliation in South Africa:

*Our country’s negotiators... opted for a compromise between the extreme of Nuremberg trials and blanket amnesty or national amnesia... granting amnesty in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought... What is it that constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution, to be so magnanimous and ready to forgive rather than wreak revenge?*

And so tolerance as a virtue at once *allows too much and does not go far enough*. And what Tutu is talking about goes way beyond tolerance.

The biblical image for the church has always been something that went beyond mere tolerance, beyond just a collection of individuals each doing their own thing, to a body that is greater than the sum of its parts.

You know, I have not been able to find one positive reference to “tolerance” in all of the scriptures. Instead, the word that keeps cropping up is “forbearance.” This word literally means, “to hold one up.” Forbearance has a positive sense to it; it is more than just putting up with each other. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling... forbearing one another in love (holding each other up in love).” Paul continues, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up into Christ.” This is how the church operates. It is a place where people grow by holding each other up, by speaking the truth to each other in love.

Paul elaborates on this: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away (we cannot tolerate these things)... be kind to one another, forgiving one another, as God forgave you.”

In addition to being kind and forgiving another mark of forbearance is to look for common ground and to the good of the whole. In our reading today, Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, “being of the same mind... being in full accord. Let each of you look to ... the interests of each other.”

The Quakers have an interesting way of making decisions in their communities. Decisions are made by consensus. This means that if just one person remained against all the rest that they would not decide to do a certain thing. And you thought it is difficult to make decisions in the U.C.C.! At first glance you might think that they wouldn't be able to get anything done at all. Sometimes it's like that, but that's not how it often works out. What happens is that because there is such forbearance, that those in the minority often learn to support decisions with which they don't agree, so that they may be of “the same mind.” This helps insure that everyone also takes responsibility for group decisions, to support and encourage each other in the path they have chosen.

So being of one mind often means that we *submit* ourselves to others and *do things we don't want to do*. It also means that we “do all things without grumbling, questions (complaining, quarreling or arguing).” (Phil. 2:14) What a great model for the church.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul laid out one simple rule for them: “Let all things be done for edification.” (v.26) In other words, *anything* we do in the church must first of all be for the *building up* of the whole. In discussing the gift of prophecy versus tongues, Paul said that the measuring stick is *that which edifies the community*, that which encourages people and builds others up. Speaking in tongues, he said, was inferior because,

“one who speaks in tongues edifies himself.” We must, he said be oriented to the good of the community, to our brothers and sisters.

God knows that the world needs more building up and less tearing down of others. And the church, when it embodies this message and models this, according to Paul, “shines like stars in the universe.”

Today, I am in the last part of a series of sermons that is about the traits and strengths of the United Church of Christ. Earlier I talked about our awareness of the unity of the whole church and of the entire creation; our history of the struggle for freedom of religious expression and the fight for authentic and autonomous thought; the commitment for justice, which is more than charity but addresses the root or systemic causes of pain and brokenness.

And in the U.C.C. there is a unique and deep appreciation for diversity. Somehow within the same denomination, traditional and non-traditional; liberal and conservative; black, brown and white; gay and straight—we all live together. And in our finer moments we do more than that, we actually treasure, appreciate and encourage each other *in spite of our differences*.

In fact, the whole structure and government of the U.C.C. depends upon our love and appreciation of each other. The very existence of the U.C.C. counts on us going way beyond tolerance with each other.

In the U.C.C. there is no coercive power or money strings to hold things together; it is all voluntary. The Constitution of the U.C.C. states that the different parts of the church have “a God-given responsibility” for each other. The members, congregations, associations, conferences and General Synod all have a mutual responsibility toward each other.

The term used to describe this responsibility is “covenant.” A covenant is never merely a promise between two parties; it is always triadic. That is, a covenant always involves God as one of the parties as well as the other. And our relation to God transforms this relation to the other. So in the U.C.C. constitution, when we fulfill our promise to God, “actions by, decisions, or advice” from one part of the church “should be held *in highest regard*” by other parts of the church.

Like the covenant of marriage, these supportive relationships in the church are voluntary. In the 1967 Statement of Purpose and Mission it says “the authority of the whole is the *self-imposed willingness of each to cooperate with the rest...*” The whole thing is held together by forbearance.

In 1975 the Rev. Oliver Power coined a famous phrase to describe this denomination, calling it “a beautiful, heady, exasperating and hopeful mix.” All these different, diverse people—an intoxicating collection—held together, somehow, by the sheer self-imposed willingness. It’s not easy, mind you. It’s

downright exasperating at times. Sometimes we can barely tolerate each other. But at other times, when we remember to appreciate and support each other, to hold each other in the highest regard, it can be a beautiful sight to behold.

I end with a legend about what heaven and hell might be like. People in hell, it is said, are much as they are here except for two things—they cannot die and their elbows won't bend. When they try to eat, they cannot get the food into their mouths. As a result they are constantly starving, though there is much food to be eaten. They fall into conflict with each other, blaming each other for their starvation. Their hunger never ends, and it worsens as they fight each other. In heaven, the people have the same situation, but they handle it differently. Instead of blaming each other and fighting because their elbows won't bend, each feeds another with her outstretched arms and in turn receives food from another in the same way. Each is free of hunger and no one *has* to die. They dwell considerately and faithfully with each other. The church strives to reflect this vision of heaven don't just tolerate but support each other.

So you see, God wants for us more than toleration of one another. In our relationships, in the church and in the world. God wants us to treasure, not tolerate each other.

And when we become a part of this kind of community where there is forbearing one another, where there is encouragement, where there is building up and not tearing down, where there is the edification of the whole body, then we will find ourselves fed and full.

And we will “shine like stars in the night as we offer the message of life.”