

An Advent Tension: Inclusiveness and Justice

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on the Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009

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God of exiles and the lost, the excluded and the oppressed, give us faith to hear and live joyfully. May we be shaped and sustained by your promises as we eagerly wait and work for the day of fulfillment. Amen.

Christmas is on us. We are in the middle of it now, but what exactly are you in the middle of? Are you in the middle of a spiritual journey to the manger, and the truth that love breaks into the world at the most unlikely of times, or are you in the middle of a rush to create the perfect family experience and the struggle to purchase and give the perfect gift?

Over the past couple of weeks I have been asking you to think much higher and deeper. I presented the weeks leading up to Christmas as a season, a theological concept, and a real life of experience. Tradition has called this season Advent meaning "to come" and we acknowledge that so much of life is lived in that moment of being between what is and what is to be.

I asked you to go further with me and consider what it means to be an Advent people. I encourage us as people of the Cross and the Wedgeblade, as people of prophetic source and prophetic outcome, to live with courage into God's future of peace and justice. Peace and justice may not be what is now but as people of God we have the privilege and joy to live into what will be. We have the joy to be ushers of a better world. As people of the Cross and Wedgeblade, if we have faith, vision, and courage, we can live in God's future here and now.

However, we are not there yet. As a congregation we definitely live in that between time. We live between what is and what will be. As a congregation we live between who we are and who we will become. Over the last couple of months I have heard people say that we do not do enough for the poor, the children, and others who are marginalized in our society. I have heard people say that we talk a good talk about justice but we are not walking the walk. I have also heard people say that we say and do too much in the name of justice. We cross some line and bring politics into the church and therefore people we love and people who care about Shadow Rock have felt alienated by such radical social change rhetoric. You would think that as opposite and contradictory as these expressions are there is no way for both

experiences to exist within the same fellowship. These comments must represent experiences of two distinct congregations; but they do not. My desire is not to side with one viewpoint over the other, not yet, but to encourage a powerful and balanced dialogue between the two.

I believe the challenge before us is three fold. Our greatest challenge as a congregation is not about more people in the pews or more money in the collection plate or the repairs of an aging facility. Our greatest challenge has to do with inclusiveness, justice, and forgiveness. Sometimes inclusiveness and justice go hand in hand and sometimes inclusiveness and justice come into tension. When inclusiveness and justice come into tension and it is resolved one way or the other then we must find the strength of love to forgive. Again, I believe our challenge is three-fold.

Inclusiveness is an attitude and practice that leaves no one out and no one behind. It is a practice at Shadow Rock UCC because at the heart of inclusiveness is the core value that every person can and should be radically affirmed. Connected to this core value is a belief that the diminishment of any one person or group is a diminishment of all of humanity.

From our faith tradition we see inclusiveness unfolding in the Christmas story. The storyteller Luke has shepherds coming to the manger thus conveying the idea that God values the poor. The storyteller Matthew has Gentile sages bringing Jesus gifts thus conveying the idea that God's love is not just for the "chosen people" but for all people. Such a spirit of inclusion continued in the ministry and table practices of Jesus as he invited everyone to the table and used such inclusion to convey what he believed was the true nature and intent of God.

Today we as a congregation take the spirit of inclusion and broaden it to include individuals and groups that our society discriminates against and sadly and unjustly pushes them to fringes of our community. We radically affirm every life and with this affirmation we call out to all people and say, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome here." This is a prophetic calling but it is also a compassionate calling. When we see the pain that society and family exclusion afflicts on a person's soul we want to take them into our spiritual family. We do this believing we are providing a compassionate and just sanctuary. Often inclusion and justice go together but sometimes they do not.

Sometimes our desire for inclusion asks that we temper our calls for justice. This means we ask people who are being treated unfairly to wait for their

fair treatment believing that our fellowship and our society will catch up. During the Civil Rights movement it was well intentioned “moderate” white people that asked black people to wait and Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a letter on why they could not and should not wait.

Sometimes our calls for justice feel like too much too soon and therefore alienates. We strain the bonds that hold us together as some say “Stop” and others say “Go”. Some say they are convinced that enough is enough and integrity calls us to make a stand, bear the costs, and mourn the loss. Others say we cannot and should not bear the costs. If it is political then it is divisive and if it is divisive it must be avoided because divisiveness undercuts our core value of inclusiveness.

We have some options.

We can be conflict avoidant and pretend that this wonderful creative tension does not exist because it scares us.

We can be pro-active, lay our cards on the table, and use this creative tension to raise the level of discussion about the people and convictions of our faith that we value most.

It is when inclusion and justice come into conflict within our fellowship that we must have forgiveness and a Shadow Rock household ethic. Our household ethic does not provide an answer but it does provide a way forward. It means we sacrifice nothing of our viewpoint but we also put the emotional and spiritual well being of the other person ahead of our own. It also means that I do not use the other person’s gentle strength against them in order to promote my own agenda. Sometimes the Spirit will move us to love more completely and that complete expression will sometimes lead us to inclusion and sometimes it will lead us to justice, but both are strengthened when accompanied by forgiveness. My agenda as your pastor at this point is to journey with you as you learn how to talk about this creative tension and you discern your own way.

This is the nature of the discussion I hope takes place January 14th with the Church Board and the All Team Council. The springboards for discussion are weddings and Crossroads United Methodist Church feeding homeless people. The purpose of the discussion is not to set policy but to monitor how we talk to each other. How we talk about these issues is a test of the strength of our fellowship. This is important to me because there are people in our fellowship who feel like they have not been heard and they have not been valued. While people may disagree with me, I never want

them to feel that they are not valued. I want you to know that I hear you and I expect all of us to hear each other.

Is not this the deeper meaning of the Christmas story? In the story about the birth of Jesus we are presented the hope of a new relationship between God and the world. Christmas was the last major holy day to be added officially to the church calendar. It was added because people believed in the power of love to break into a love starved world. They wanted to lift up the idea that the Creator would take the initiative to re-create Creation. When we say that love came down at Christmas we are saying that we love because we were first loved. In our Advent discussions about what is and what is to be, who will love first?