

PREPARE YE THE WAY

By Sylvia Richards

Romans 12 9-18

Some weeks ago I was chatting with Eric Toskey, one of our regular visitors, who with his family has become active in our community. He was asking me some questions about our congregation. I commented that we were in kind of a waiting mode – waiting to see what our new minister will be like and what new flavor he will bring to our process. He said maybe it should be the other way around. In his experience, the congregation used the transition period to circle up and decide what direction they wanted to take so they could inform the new minister. Eric was in a leadership position in his former church where they did that, and it was very much appreciated by the new pastor.

Last week after the information meeting, I was on a high for a couple of days. Not only because it seems like the search committee has found someone who sounds like a great fit, but also because they were so united. Truthfully, I have to confess that I thought that committee was too diverse to ever come to consensus. But there they were, all saying something different about our candidate, but obviously integrated with each other. It reminded me of sometimes when the choir is singing and they altogether sound like one voice.

Their enthusiasm about this man was contagious. I got very excited and thought this is a person who can pull us together. Then I remembered what Eric said, and I thought: we've got four months before he comes, (given that the congregation elects him.) Maybe we can do some pulling together of ourselves. From what Mary Holloway said last Sunday, I think he would like that.

I believe there are two ways we can do some preparing. One is to revisit the areas where we want to grow. When we did the profile workshops we identified some major directions and wrote them large upon big white paper. I'm not sure we have done much about implementation. The second thing is relationships. I know that there are some unhealed places in our community. I believe we can do something about that. Those of you who saw the committee last week standing there smiling like Cheshire cats saw something we could perhaps achieve in the whole community if we do what they did. Talk and listen to each other.

The Toskeys former community did several things to prepare: They did some polling of the whole congregation. They came up with three major goals they wanted to accomplish and formed leadership teams. They did a lot of meeting and even one retreat to get everyone on board. I guess we have to decide if we want to do that or simply wait. If you attended J.F. Wickey's ordination service you heard Rev. Frank Dietz proclaim that it is not transformational leadership, but rather a transformational life style that makes a community whole.

What is probably even closer to my heart is the relational aspect. In my lifetime – which is stacking up to be a lot of time – I don't remember a time when our nation was as polarized as it is today – maybe the McCarthy era. It is so discouraging to see what is happening to our country – how split we are. How dogmatic and mean people can be to each other – as at the town hall demonstrations. I guess that is the human condition. It happens in many groups, large and small. Last week one of the questions put to the search committee was whether

the candidate had been informed of the past polarities of our congregation. They said he had.

I don't think we are as polarized today as we have been, but there is still a need to pay attention to one of our chief articles of faith that is dear to all of us: inclusiveness. We are proud of our inclusiveness, but at times each of us is a bit hypocritical. I include myself in this indictment. We are good about including visitors, and minorities. We have deliberately studied and worked to be more hospitable. Where I think we fail is in how we sometimes treat each other when there is a different theological orientation or a different point of view about how things should be.

At one time in the choir, of our basses had to sing tenor when there weren't enough tenors present. We used to tease him about being "bi-sectional." I think we are all bisectional, that is, we have inner polarities with which we struggle both individually and collectively. If we cling to one side and deny the other, we are in danger of becoming extremists. I don't think we have any extremists here, but we progressives can be just as dogmatic as the fundies at times. I don't think we make much room for people who have a different take on the Christian story. We can be a bit arrogant about our "progressiveness" and down-putting to those who have more traditional views and/or those who have a different definition of what "progressive" means.

I like the way theologian Sallie McFague writes about this. Because we are in an uncertain world without clear directions, we develop constructs out of what we are taught, and our own experience. We form belief systems to explain life to ourselves so that we won't feel so lost and anxious. This is a good thing. It reduces our anxiety and helps with our everyday decision-making and choices. The problem is that, after awhile we forget they are constructs and hold them as absolute truth. McFague says, "Theological constructions are 'houses' to live in for awhile, with windows partly open and doors ajar; they become prisons when they no longer allow us to come and go, to add a room or take one away – or if necessary, to move out and build a new house."

Sometimes we get frustrated and competitive when we try to do something together. What is the solution to that? Talking and listening attentively to each other and working out mutual agreements. Then following through with what we agreed upon. It sounds simple. Of course, it is not. If it were, our world wouldn't be in such a mess.

We deal with all kinds of polarities: light/dark; feminine/masculine; sharing/greedy; metaphorical/literal; dependent/independent; compliant/assertive; bold/timid; emotional/intellectual; permissive/disciplined; for unity/for autonomy.

That last one was what kept the UCC from coming together for a couple of decades. The Congregationalists wanted more autonomy and the E and R more unity. They met for some 20 years before they were able to hammer out the compromise that is our denomination today.

One of the splits that has puzzled me is the difference between how we express ourselves in the Meeting House and how we express ourselves in the Education Building. I read something recently that helped. In Ted Loder's book, Loaves, Fishes, and Leftovers, he says, "When a truth is too big to speak, you have to sing it. In a profound way, that's what music is about – and literature, poetry, and drama. They present the meaning of life as what is true beyond scientific proof."

Recently I had a dream image that inspired me to reread a book that had been important to me in the past – a book by Ann and Barry Ulanov, both professors of Religion and Psychology. The message that stood out was: In order to heal the splits in the world, one must heal the splits in oneself. I find that takes a lot of self-reflection and prayer, and intimate conversation with trusted friends. Jim Hollis, former director of the Jung Center puts it this way, “Analysis and self-awareness are not acts of selfishness or narcissism. The kindest thing you can do for the people you love, and the culture at large, is to take care of the toxic waste [that is leftover hard feelings] in your own life so that you aren’t projecting it out onto others.”

Every time I am up here on this rostrum looking out on you the congregation, I have this experience of realizing how fond I am of you - all of you. But you might not know that. I’m basically an introvert and shyer than you might think. I’ve been thinking about learning to be more outwardly loving. There’s a woman I see several times a week who is my model. Her name is Alice and she’s the manager of the gym at the Y where I exercise. She makes it a point to know the name of every person who comes there, and she greets us as if seeing us makes her day. She makes my day! And inspires me to want to follow her example.

We come from different cultures and subcultures, different family systems, and we are educated differently. No wonder we have a hard time understanding each other. But maybe that’s what it means to be the instruments of God on earth. To figure out how to work and play together to create peace.

I loved what President Obama did with the conflict between the professor, Henry Louis Gates and the policeman, James Crowley – inviting them for a conversation and a beer. What a good and simple idea. A way to tame the bully within each of them.

In some cases of talking and listening, there may be a need to think about forgiveness. I think the best thing I have ever read on that subject is in the novel, The Shack. The author, William Young, conveys the idea that forgiveness benefits the forgiver first, and allows for relationship if there can be enough change for the possibility to rebuild trust.

Now, I want to issue a couple of challenges in the spirit of Paul’s charge to the Romans that Anthony read. First, I challenge you to give some thought about whether you want to just wait for our new guy, or dream some dreams and take some leadership toward new directions. Garnering support is not always easy, but we have done some amazing things when we have put our minds and hearts to it. Help is available, and the Holy Spirit lives here with all the power we might need.

Secondly, I challenge each of you to pick someone who is different from you in some way – perhaps someone you have avoided for that reason - and spend an hour or two talking and listening. I assure you that I’m giving the same challenge to myself. I hope we will each take personal responsibility to step up to the plate and ready our community for a new chapter.

I close with another quote from Ted Loder, who is a retired pastor and theologian who has been very active in social justice leadership both in South Africa and in our own civil rights movement. Someone asked him to define the mission of the church. He said, “The mission isn’t to peddle certainty, but to promote trust amidst uncertainty; it isn’t to seek security, but to nurture the love that reduces fear.”