

Notes from the February 17, 2019 Circle Conversation Led by the Fulfilling Our Vision Ad Hoc Committee – United Church of Strafford, Vermont

Attendees: Gretchen Hannon, Bill Williams, Joey Hawkins, Linda Williams, Meg Albee, Christa Wurm, John Hawkins, Jim Schley, Tom Kinder, Christina Robinson

Instructions: Next meeting on the March 3rd will follow up what happens today. The goal of this entire process is to discern how our congregation feels called to fulfill the part of our Future Directions Vision that says “We intend to be a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.” This second part of today’s meeting will follow the restorative justice circle format. Speak from your own perspective, don’t comment on what others have said. This is a listening circle—most of what we do is listen to others and even when we speak we are trying to listen to our innermost voice.

Question 1: [We began the gathering by spending some time reviewing what was written on the issue sheets on the Parish Hall walls about trying to live as a society by the Golden Rule.] 1. What did you notice or learn from going around looking at the issue posters?

- Some things are a lot more difficult to accomplish than others. Gender/sexual orientation issue doesn’t seem to require anything other than in each of us a change in our attitude – doesn’t seem difficult to take on. Other issues seem more of a challenge, for instance will require money or being willing to go without in order to make significant changes.
- I noticed in myself a heavy feeling of being small and not very powerful. What I deduce in what people say is that it’s easy to see what needs to be different but hard to feel like our small steps can be effective or meaningful. Tying it into the focus of church today, no huge changes in the world have ever been easy or quick. Things that matter require pounding the pavement, singing, shouting, until the people who have the power listen.
- Thinking of refugees and the golden rule brought the statue of liberty to mind, and thoughts of how drastically the response to it or its use as a symbol has changed since its days as a beacon to immigrants. There is an important difference between equality and equity. Equality doesn’t mean anything if I start off in a better place than someone else. Equity is what I am for.
- Looking at the sheets it is very clear to me what’s right. But I’m not knowledgeable about how my privilege affects everything in my life. I need to learn more about that to have a better understanding about these issues. I’m inclined to feel impatient that they’re obvious.
- Life planning is a process that helps people find their heart’s core calling in life and helps them live that innermost dream. We run into obstacles, as we see on the gender and sexual orientation issue sheet, that are not external but internal obstacles. Inner obstacles can be much harder to overcome than outer obstacles. There is fear that we need to be liberated from. On January 6th we said selfishness and fear were blocking us living by the golden rule in each of these issues on the wall. Fear in our culture for hundreds of years is hard to get over, but it feels as if the gender/sexual orientation issue area has gone through a fast cultural shift recently. It gives me hope about other changes being possible.

- Looking at refugees and racism, I don't know what I don't know. I don't want to be selfish, I want to be attentive to it.
- I am a process person. About the environment: 1) Education – we need to learn more. Education is an action. Educational goals for ourselves and our community. Speakers, posters at store, everyone has a body of knowledge. This is a ripe topic and the inclination of people who live here is to be concerned about nature. 2) Scope: we're so small, the task is so large. Obstacles – the important thing is to start, and to start small if that's what you have, and feel good about it. don't have to come to the end before you come to the beginning. It can be paralyzing to feel that you're too small. The church can be a drum major in Strafford – educate ourselves and pass on our education, it isn't up to one person. The drum major doesn't DO all the work. 3) Being a force implies action. There needs to be a focus to activities. Don't try to do it all. Focus on something we can realistically accomplish. It is important how our energy is directed. Start with a little action we can do, this gives us courage and confidence and draws other people in.
- I was struck by the range of general to very specific statements. Action has to be something you're doing rather than just feeling. With the Golden Rule every person matters. Individual people matter. It is an important perspective, it is easy to lose track of that when focusing on the bigger level, but it isn't either/or.
- Hard to separate the sheets from today's sermon. Requirement of sacrifice is part of the fear. Can be hard to envision what that sacrifice might have to look like.
- I am a person of privilege – I know 10 things I could/should do for each of these issues and I don't do them because I tell myself I don't have time in my busy life and also because I don't live on a small Pacific island with waves lapping at my front door, so I have the luxury of time which privilege gives me. As a mom it is hard to take actions that will place burdens on my kids – that is a big obstacle for me, it feels very hard, even though NOT taking the action and asking my kids to make sacrifices (eg carpooling vs having quiet time in the car) will impact their future world.

Question 2: What helps or could help you personally live more by the Golden Rule and ethic of love when you are having a hard time doing so in a particularly challenging or confusing situation?

- Care Bear Stare (From Wikipedia page on the Care Bears (teddy bear stars of an 80's TV show): The Care Bears' ultimate weapon is the "Care Bear Stare" (a.k.a. "Belly Magic"), in which the collected Bears stand together and radiate light from their respective belly symbols. These combine to form a ray of love and good cheer which could bring caring and joy into the target's heart when someone is in danger of doing wrong. Thinking of the Care Bear Stare helps me remember to decide to love someone when they are acting out. It helps me remember that everyone wants to be their best selves, we all have infinite power to be good, and all behaviors come from a need, something that is lacking. Thinking about this helps me act toward the other person in a way that is being the person I want to be.

- This group helps me. Also, Helen Nearing had a sign over the sink that said “Do as much as you can with the time that you have, and be kind.”
- Pray!
- Join our contemplative circle and learn the welcoming practice. Both the circle and the practice have been hugely helpful to me.
- Dialogue with someone that you love—when you see someone is in pain, you can feel trepidation to approach them, it’s an awkward moment, you fear rejection. Dialogue is terribly important. If it is focused, it can have an outcome. Everything has to end in action. This group is providing that dialogue for the church. Talking to anybody you learn a lot about them and a lot about yourself. I want to see a meeting which has a predetermined outcome (goal).
- In the moment with a person you might not be kind to, remember that that person needs something. That person has a value I might not be seeing now.
- I have a really hard time loving certain people in the present moment. If I turn them into a baby I can love them and recognize that they came into this world with no preconceived notions or hatred or bigotry, that they were perfect once and all kinds of outside forces changed them into less than perfect. It helps me to take them to the most basic human level which is love. It makes my compassion grow even if I don’t understand. Walking a mile in someone else’s shoes is tremendous and we often can’t really do it. Helping people with different backgrounds understand how to interact with one another. When things are hard with someone, think about what in the other person’s experience is affecting this interaction. But if the other person doesn’t do the same thing for you, you can get stuck. We each have an experience. If we would step into each other’s experience as close as we possibly can, and be curious and ask questions ad nauseum, all of the world’s problems in all these issues would be solved.
- In the contemplative circle we call these 5A opportunities, taken from the Cynthia Bourgeault book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*—crazy making situations you can’t deal with. Sit down, take deep breaths –this has been very helpful to me. Very helpful listening to everyone in these groups, understanding that my piece is just a small part of the understanding.
- My wife is extremely quick to respond with acts of lovingkindness. I am slower. There are times when I realize I missed the opportunity to love my neighbor because I paused instead of acting and the moment passed. I analyze later, what was it? Was it fear, or selfishness? Sometimes I give myself a pep talk before I go out to look for opportunities, and to make myself stop and take the time to do that kind thing. So intention helps, and learning from experience, and the Welcoming Practice helps if fear is blocking me.

Question 3: It is obvious that our society has a hard time living by the Golden Rule in all these issue areas. What could help our society overcome its obstacles and change its policies and culture so that it would reflect the Golden Rule and ethic of love in the issue areas we are considering?

- Role models, people willing to be vulnerable and brave and put themselves out there as examples.
- Support by creating listening circles like this.
- Whole country? Society? Beats me. Maybe if they prayed? This is too big a question.
- Whatever tiny chunk of society you're talking about, people help who smile and laugh and show that they like other people and are willing to step out on a limb and say living by the Golden Rule matters and we have to do it. Voting also helps.
- The role of allies is tremendous. It has been so meaningful to have male allies appreciating my speaking out about issues relating to women. For white men the need to have an ally isn't familiar. For everyone else it is a huge need. There is a power people who feel small can feel come to them when a person who is culturally bigger takes their hand. This is so, so big. This is what every subject up on the wall is about – people and a planet who need more hand holding. Step up and take their hand!
- Truth. We now live in a post-truth society where leaders just make things up. How to get truth – not sure, but that's where I start from.
- Kindness.
- I think what helps me overcome my obstacles to live by the Golden Rule and ethic of love would also help society. Wanting and making an intention to live by the golden rule, having a vision of what it would look like to live by the Golden Rule in each of these issue areas or as a society as a whole. The vision needs to be so beautiful and have so many benefits that people are willing to make sacrifices and do things they need to do to make it happen. Yes we need role models and examples AND a critical mass. Army / navy / RPI study showed that when 10% of a community / society / nation becomes fervently committed to an idea it can change the whole culture. Vision, intention, listening circles, we need allies and collaborative discernment. One wise woman said I'm not sure I want to be a force because I have to ponder—part of living by the Golden Rule and ethic of love is that it is not easy to know in extremely complex situations and issues exactly how to do it, so pondering that as a society in a non-polarizing setting like this is part of every solution and needs to be a constant practice. Just asking the question and listening to one another grapple with it is transformative of society in the Golden Rule direction.
- Thought about laws as what society needs, that's part of it. Important to recognize that we can survive feeling uncomfortable when we make ourselves vulnerable by engaging with people who disagree or are upset or seem different from us. We can do that, we can be with them and survive. We are so separate and I can't find compassion because I have no idea what it is like to be you and if I sit with you it may be uncomfortable but that's ok. That feeling will pass and we will make progress together. "Awkward soup on the menu tonight, so come on down to the listening circle!"
- One of the qualities of an ally in the sense we are using: if a literature teacher says 'Shakespeare is great,' it is different than if a soccer coach says 'Shakespeare is great,' because the literature teacher may be ignored because she always says that, but it isn't the coach's thing, so it captures a different audience and it gives strength to the statement.