

Truth in a World of Lies

Preached By Rev. Wendy Jones

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Red Brocade
by Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

It's been quite a year. This time last year, the supreme court had just legalized gay marriage and the image that still fills my head is that beautiful picture of the white house bathed in rainbow lights. The symbolism of that act still brings tears to my eyes.

At the same time that we were rejoicing at the supreme court decision to allow gay marriage, the country was dealing with the shock and grief of the Charleston shootings in North Carolina where a young white man walked into a black church, attended Bible study with the congregants and then shot and killed 9 of them including the pastor.

And now, today one year later, we are coming to terms with the murder of 50 people in Orlando Florida in a gay night club.

It has also been the year of Black Lives Matter and having the conversation about race in a way that I would argue we haven't had in many many years. And as a result is making many people across the country uncomfortable.

In one sense it feels like as a nation we have made great progress, and yet, at the same time I worry about the back lash. We get gay marriage but then we end up having a national debate about bathrooms.

Add on to that the Presidential election and it becomes a perfect storm for anger, deceit, frustration. This election has brought with it some of the most blatantly racist rhetoric I have heard in a long long time.

So, here we are on this is the Fourth of July weekend and we are going to be celebrating our Independence tomorrow. Would our founding mothers & fathers be happy with where we are as a nation? Would our UU mothers and fathers be proud of where we are as a denomination?

My sermon title today comes from the question I have been asking myself over the past few months as I've seen angry protestors clashing with supporters of the presumptive Republican nominee. As I've seen the corruption on both sides of the political isle. As I've heard rhetoric that I thought had left the American landscape being used again. Are we moving forward as a nation or backwards?

I don't know.

I am a fairly optimistic person. I tend to look for the bright side of things. And, in general I think that I am optimistic about where we are headed. This optimism comes from a TV show I recently watched with my husband. It's called man in the high castle, and the premise is based on the question what if we had lost WWII. So, the setting is here in the United States, but the Eastern seaboard is controlled by the Nazi's and the Western half of the country is controlled by the Japanese.

I was a few episodes into the series when I looked at Cameron and said, "something is missing.' Where are all the Americans? What I meant by this was where are the characters who are fighting back, who are plotting, who are thinking for themselves. Where are the American hero characters? Cameron answered there is none of that in Nazi controlled areas. No freedom of assembly, no freedom of religion, the Bible was banned, no right to privacy, no right to a fair trial.

And then I contrasted that with the images of the actual news of the day. 10,000 people at a Bernie Sanders rally, people outside protesting at a Donald Trump rally, political pundits on TV explaining why they support this or that candidate.

Reporters going up to individual people asking their opinions, and regardless of the opinions people we ready and able to answer. I love Bernie! Why? Because a, b, c. I'm Hillary all the way! I'm tired of the direction this country is headed and I want a change so I think Donald Trump will bring that change."

In a sense, this is why I am optimistic. It is such a stark contrast to the lack of spirit or personality of the show. I know that it was just a TV show but it really really bothered me to see images of Nazi & Japanese occupation controlling our historical landmarks.

And there was something oddly comforting by turning the channel and watching images of loud, opiniated political conversation taking place. It reminded me that as Americans we do have some things going for us.

Even though it can be easy to watch how arrogant we can come across and self absorbed, I do think that there is something to be said for the almost inherent belief that if we don't like something we can change it. That if we want to see a change we can rally and organize and use our voices. Sometimes I wonder if our freedoms are so ingrained and secure that we really do take them for granted.

I believe that I told this story a few months ago, but this year at the Grand Valley Interfaith thanksgiving service there were two young men who stood up to represent the Muslim community. The first thing they did was condemn the attacks in Paris and then they read a prayer for peace out of the Koran.

After they were finished one of the men said, "I know this isn't in the program but I must say something."

He went on to explain that he has lived in many different countries. As a child every time they would move his father would tell him "never let anybody know where you are from."

He said, "I have kept that practice until now; until I came to the United States of America. I just want you to know that I am so thankful to be here in a country where I can safely stand and tell you that I am a Palestinian from the Gaza strip."

So much has been happening throughout the world in the past months, the attacks in Orlando, an attack on the airport in Turkey, a hostage stand off just this weekend and even closer to home we had a shooting in the parking garage down the road at St. Mary's.

As expected, with this type of turmoil comes divisive rhetoric here in the United States. Do we take in the Syrian refugees who are being displaced? Some say absolutely not. We can't trust "them" because they are just a "front" for ISIS to sneak in terrorists.

Do we build a wall against Mexico. Some say absolutely because they are dangerous people crossing our borders. Even better we'll get Mexico to pay for the wall and we'll be "great again."

When you combine these events with an election year you have the potential for a real mess.

It has been a long time since I have heard or seen such a divided country.

I have really been trying to figure out the psychology behind this rhetoric and fear. As many of you know I am not a knee jerk person. It takes a lot for me to write somebody off as "just a bigot, or racist, or homophobe." I like to give people the benefit of the doubt. Even people who I disagree with. I really try to listen to what is being said.

I have to admit that this has been hard for me this year because some of the flat out racism and bigotry I'm hearing is at a level I have never seen in the public square. At least in my lifetime. It almost feels like we have gone backwards 60 years when this type of rhetoric was not only accepted but expected.

So what is going on?

Where is the compassion?

Why is it so easy to simply look the other way, and not acknowledge or recognize the humanity of so many people in this world?

What do we do as individuals and as people of faith when it seems that we are surrounded by political corruption, deceit lies, and a new emerging racism that is rising to the public debate and dialogue?

I think that there are three things that we can do to begin the conversation:

1. We can quit labeling ourselves and others
2. Really try to hear and understand
3. Offer true compassion & Empathy: Do unto others

Many years ago I decided that my favorite saying from Jesus was "I Am." Who are you Jesus? Are you God? I Am.

Many people take this as evidence that Jesus is labeling himself as God, because the Hebrew God Yahew referred to himself as the great I Am. I understand that phrase a little bit differently.

I take it to mean that Jesus was refusing to let other people label him.

In addition, he was refusing to place himself in a box by labeling himself. If you think about it the religious leaders throughout history who have made the largest impact are those people who were able to transcend the labels that people attempted to place on them.

Buddha was a Prince. His father and his people had already labeled him as a future leader of their country. However, when he renounced all of his worldly possession and went off to find his own path, he chose to define himself.

Gahndi was born into one of the higher caste systems in India. According to the labels of his birth he was destined to live a very comfortable life in India. However, he chose to redefine himself.

The same can be said for Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa was raised in a middle class upbringing in Europe and yet made the most difference in the slums of India.

Are you God? So you say I am.

We live in a time where labels mean everything.

If we can find the right label for somebody and put him or her in the correct box, we can then decide whether or not he or she is worth listening to. We can decide whether or not that person is worth helping.

I used to really struggle with this. I've had the hardest time trying to figure out which box I belong in, so that I could label myself in the correct way.

The problem is that the labels that other people make didn't fit me. As a UU I like the freedom of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, but I am told by others that UU's are just a bunch of socialist, atheist liberals who want to bring communism into this country. Hmmm. That doesn't really sound like me, but I guess I'd better not put myself in that box.

Do you see how easily we do this to each other? How easily we do this to ourselves. This is why I love the statement "I Am" I just am. . . I am Wendy a theological liberal and a fiscal conservative. I am Wendy, a Unitarian Universalist married to a Greek Orthodox. I am Wendy prochoice, but very concerned about abortion. I don't fit into a box. Just as none of us fit into a box. And yet we are living in a time where that seems to be all we do is label people according our own definitions and find them unworthy.

This election cycle has been one of the worst I seen in regards to rhetorical labels & name calling.

I mean, if we can just relegate an entire ethnic group to a bunch of would be terrorists or an entire race to a bunch of racists, we don't have to listen to anything they say or look at them as people in need of compassion and support.

We label as a way to discount and ignore. I know that I am much more than a bunch of labels, and I know that everybody else is too. And yet it is so easy to fall into that trap.

So, am I liberal? Am I conservative? I don't know. I actually have no idea what those labels mean anymore. I'd rather ask the question, am I kind, am I compassionate? Do I treat others with the dignity and respect they deserve even as we disagree theologically or politically. This is the true test. These are the standards by which I measure myself and these are the standards by which I measure my friends.

We don't have all the answers, but as people coming from a faith tradition that asks us to see beyond our own comfortable world, perhaps we are being called to join together, to be that collective voice that says we are better than this.

Perhaps we are being called to do more than sit and name call on Facebook. Maybe we are being called to acknowledge our place in the interconnected web, to move out in faith that with that connection will come security. Maybe we are being called to leave our comfort zones, open our hearts, homes and minds to the "other" with the expectation that the "other" may be a great gift to us.

Will we continue to be a country where people can safely & honestly answer the question "where are you from?" I sincerely hope so.

So I've come to the point, that when I am deciding whether or not I want a person in my life, I don't look at their politics. I don't look at their religious affiliation. I look at their character. I look at the type of people they are. Do they treat others with kindness? Do they have the ability to respectfully disagree with somebody without demonizing them? Do they come running to help their neighbors? Those are the qualities I have decided that matter when I am choosing my friends.

Now when people ask me to define myself. I simply smile at them and say "I Am Wendy"

