

Inherent Worth & Dignity

Preached by

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“You cannot affirm someone’s inherent worth by enabling their self destruction.”

Cameron Jones

I am going to do a reading today that is probably familiar to most of us. But, in light of the supreme court decision earlier this week which basically resulted in the legalization of same sex marriage in Colorado I would invite us to listen to these words from Marianne Williamson with our GLBT brothers and sisters in mind.

Even though this was an exciting week for many people who have been on the front lines in the fight for marriage equality, between Facebook, and personal conversations I’ve encountered three stories of young people who are struggling with their own truth and their identity as they have been rejected by their family, one kicked out of her house, and another sent to a “reeducation” program and the third one basically grounded. So, the fight for the inherent worth and dignity of all of us still goes on. Let us listen to these words by Marianne Williamson with this in our mind.

Where in your life have you acted small so that another might not feel insecure or uncomfortable? What would it feel like to claim your power in that situation?

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

----from ***A Return to Love***, by Marianne Williamson.

This year we are incorporating monthly themes into our worship services. We are looking at the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. When people talk about the seven principles, I often hear people say, "The principle I struggle with the most is "the inherent worth and dignity of all people.'

I've always found that somewhat puzzling because for me I have no problem with the concept of inherent worth and dignity. I think that maybe the reason it is so easy for me is because I tend to focus on the word "inherent". When I think of the word inherent I think of children.

I don't think any of us would ever look at a group of new born babies in a hospital and say that they don't all have inherent worth.

Our instinct when we see a child run in front of a speeding car is to jump in and grab her; to protect her. It's instinct. On a deep level, an inner knowing beyond words we acknowledge the worth in that child's life and instinctively jump in to protect that child.

So, I don't think the struggle with the principle stems from the "inherent" part of the principle.

I wonder if the struggle is more about the implications we ourselves make when we hear the last part of that phrase "inherent worth & dignity *of every person.*" Maybe the issue is with the "every person" part, because we can all think of certain people we are not that happy with.

We know what to do with babies and children. We have no problem acknowledging their inherent worth. (Sometime we feel like we might want to strangle them. But we would still jump in front of a speeding car for them.)

So, no. I think the struggle with this principle comes from somewhere or something else.

I wonder if the problem is with the premise that many of us begin with as opposed to the principle itself.

I think that perhaps we begin to go into a logical fallacy that says that if we acknowledge the inherent worth and dignity of all people then we somehow have to turn a blind eye to all types of really abhorrent behavior.

Because we don't want to excuse bad behavior we create a sense of cognitive dissonance within our selves. It goes something like this:

"If I acknowledge his inherent worth that means I have to forgive him, and I don't want to forgive him because I am still angry at him.

And now I am a bad person for not wanting to forgive him, and I shouldn't be angry at him, so I'll pretend that I am not angry and I will forgive, and then I will spend the rest of my days feeling resentful, because I never really felt like he deserved to be forgiven in the first place and all I've done is repress my own true feelings even deeper.

And now I'm feeling, angry, resentful, sad, ashamed and downright tired. All because I have conflated the idea that acknowledging this jerk's inherent worth means I have to ignore all of his bad behavior."

How exhausting!

I don't know, but I don't think that's really all that effective.

So basically what we have done is decide that:

Acknowledging inherent worth = unconditional acceptance = not making value judgments = I can't ask for accountability = I need to accept their behavior = I have to submerge my own inherent worth = I can't express my truth = I need to be silent. Which results in feeling extremely powerless.

And then we wonder why people have a problem with the concept of inherent worth & dignity.

It would be interesting to poll a few psycho-therapists and counselors and ask them if repressing our feelings and trying to fool ourselves into not feeling them has ever proved an effective method of therapy.

So, I wonder if perhaps the issue is not inherent worth. Maybe the real issue is our understanding of forgiveness.

Maybe where we are getting tripped up is in our understanding of what it means to actually forgive somebody. Forgiveness is an ideal that may have become paralyzing for some of us because we don't always understand what it means to forgive.

I think many of us understand forgiveness to mean exonerating somebody who has wronged us, and somehow convincing ourselves that what they did is "okay." Somehow that is supposed to make us feel better. My understanding of forgiveness is a little bit different. The Hebrew word for forgiveness means "to release or let go."

Forgiveness is letting go of the energy around a person or an event. It is not pretending that the event or behavior was okay.

I'm going to ask a very heretical question. Is it possible that in order to truly be able to recognize the inherent worth in another person we may have to be willing to give ourselves permission to not forgive them in the traditional sense?

I can see the headlines now. Unitarian minister just told her congregation not to forgive! Yikes. Am I telling you not to forgive? Well, yes, with a qualifier. I think we need to rethink our understanding of what it means to forgive and how we go about moving towards forgiveness.

If we think that forgiveness simply means turning the other cheek and letting somebody abuse you over and over again I am going to say not to forgive.

We look to Jesus as the role model for acknowledging other people's inherent worth. But, he did not become a doormat as a result. He was able to acknowledge inherent worth and still hold on to righteous anger. While he was turning over the tables in the synagogue, did he say "oh those people have inherent worth, I can't speak my truth?" No, he was willing to stand his ground and call out bad behavior.

Jesus was willing to speak his truth. He was willing to stand in his truth and take the consequences. But, he did not excuse other people's behavior. He did not let himself become a doormat. He was willing to die for a higher principle, but he never excused or justified other people's bad behavior.

He was willing to bring the powerful down, and lift the powerless up. The woman at the well was already down. "I see you. I acknowledge you, and you are better than that. Go be better."

And then he would walk away. He would release them. And people were inspired to be better.

If we adopt the Hebrew understanding of forgiveness and look at what it means to release or let go of painful energy then maybe I will say that there is some value in forgiveness.

So how do we forgive?

Ultimately, I believe that the only way to forgive is to be willing to be truly authentic and take the time and do the work required to be real with both ourselves and the people we are struggling with.

How do we get real? I've come up with five steps.

1. Realize that the issue is never really the issue

The first thing that I would say, and this is my motto this year, is “The issue is never really the issue.”

When I was working in the retirement center in Newport Rhode Island, I remember one day one of the men got extremely angry at the activity director for changing the seating chart for bingo. He came in to talk to me about it. After we talked about Bingo for about ten minutes and he was getting ready to leave he said, “by the way, I’m going to the eye doctor tomorrow and I think that they are going to take away my driver’s license.” It wasn’t about Bingo. It was about grief and loss and fear of losing even more of his independence. Having his license allowed him to go visit his wife of 50 years who was across town in the Alzheimer’s ward every day. This wasn’t about Bingo.

2. The second thing we need to do is ask ourselves is this tension about the other or about what is going on inside of me.

Sometimes our anger at somebody else is really misdirected anger at ourselves. A few weeks ago we were driving to church. We were halfway there when I looked back and realized that neither one of my children had shoes on. I lost it. It’s interesting how children can push buttons in ways that nobody else can. Really, after my rant it came down to the fact that I was actually mad at myself for being so disorganized.

It’s no wonder that my children did nothing more than make physical manifest of my chaos. It wasn’t about them. It was about me. Of course later on I apologized and Nathaniel said in his very pragmatic way, “It’s okay mom. You yell at us every Sunday morning.”

I know that this is kind of a simple example, but the point is that sometimes we are directing our anger at somebody else, when on some level we really are angry at ourselves.

3. Acknowledging that maybe we’re not the right people

Maybe we are not the people who should be forgiving or recognizing this person’s inherent worth at this time.

Our congregation has recently put together a Domestic Violence task force to deal with issues related to domestic violence in the Grand Valley. I will tell you that trying to tell a woman who is trying to get out of an abusive relationship that she just needs to turn the other cheek and “forgive” her abuser is not helpful.

That said, part of what our task force is looking at is the fact, that many times the people who are doing the abusing have their own internal issues and struggles going on. There should be a place where they can go to feel safe to work on their issues, to

understand how they have come to do the type of behavior that they have. However, it is NOT their partner's/spouse's role to be that safe place for them.

Sometimes it is the role of the therapists or spiritual care providers to work together. One person will work the victim, and we find a trusted person to work with the abuser. Does the abuser have inherent worth? Yes. Is it the role of the battered victim to acknowledge it? NO!

Even in our own family system, it is interesting, but the people who have the most capacity to recognize the inherent worth of my mother in law are my parents.

They are just far enough removed from the emotional attachment that they are able to acknowledge her in a way that I don't know will ever be possible for Cameron. "I'll help her with money. But I have no emotional energy to give her." Is that a form of forgiveness? It's a letting go. He's no longer angry. He just no longer has any emotional energy left for her.

And yet that is not to say that she is not worthy of compassion. But that compassion comes from other people, not her son. He's not able to go there yet. Maybe some day, maybe not.

4. Maybe it's not time to forgive

- a. Parent who just lost their child to a drunk driver (best friend was driving)
 - i. The driver, maybe another teenager needs to be acknowledged but maybe not at that time by that person - - eventually the parents may learn to forgive their son's friend, but it might take some time
 - ii. I can't look at you, I can't acknowledge your grief, I can't see your inherent worth, I can't go there.
 - iii. Maybe later but not now. Can we give ourselves permission to say "not now, not yet."

5. Maybe authentic anger is needed before forgiveness may be granted.

A few months ago I talked about how people are welcome here. And I told the visitors at the time, we welcome you here. Please bring who you REALLY are. Not who you think we might want you to be. Bring your authentic self.

I wonder if forgiveness isn't the same thing. It won't work if we are trying to fool ourselves into a certain "acceptable" feelings. We can't "think" ourselves into warm feelings in regards to another. Maybe the key to true forgiveness is a willingness to express true emotion which may be anger, resentment or even bitterness. Pretending we don't feel those emotions doesn't help anybody.

How many of us have been around somebody who is clearly angry at us and yet they won't tell us why, and they keep saying that "it's fine" as they stomp around the house?

It's not helpful to us and it's not helpful to the person. How many of us at some point or other have just yelled, if you're mad at me tell me! I can't fix it if I don't even know why I'm in trouble!"

If we want to heal a relationship, or heal our own hurts we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves and others about our feelings. Repressing them doesn't work. It will always come out in another way.

In conclusion, we've turned forgiveness into a commodity. We hear over and over again about the benefits of forgiveness. But it is not that simple, and it does NOT mean glossing over bad behavior or justifying bad behavior. As long as we are attempting to do that we will never be healed.

We may be healed by being real. By doing hard work. By learning how to be authentic, by acknowledging that healing may take time, and in our fast food culture we think everything needs to happen right away. We don't even give ourselves time to grieve a loss let alone forgive somebody who might be at the root cause of that loss.

Maybe after we've done all that, we just might be able to let go enough to begin to once again see the person we are struggling with. When we are mired in our own stuff we can't see them. We can't acknowledge them. Once we are willing to be real and true to ourselves; to acknowledge that our feelings matter, then we might be able to begin to once again see the "inherent worth" in the other.

I acknowledge that I haven't even touched on the concept of what we do with larger macro issues such as the Taliban, Isis, religious extremism. How do we recognize the inherent worth in some of these world issues? That is an entire sermon in itself and will be forthcoming in "Inherent Worth Part II."

For today my invitation to you is to take some time to think about somebody you may be struggling with. Is it possible that you cannot recognize that other person, because there is still work that needs to be done on your end before you will be able to let go enough to see them in a different light? Are you willing to give yourself permission to give yourself the time needed to work on it?

Today, I have barely scratched the surface of a much larger concept, so I would like to invite you to explore this more. My door is always open and I would be happy to help you work through some of this.