

6-29-14 Homily by Scott Denson at the UUCU “**Populist or Progressive: How to Make the World (Our Community) a Better Place**”

I was watching the news last week and saw that the situation in Iraq is deteriorating badly. Lot’s of fighting – lot’s of killing. NBC reported that over 4400 Americans had died there since the invasion began and more than 32,000 had been wounded. The broadcast I was watching did not report the number of Iraqis killed and wounded during that time. They did mention that many Iraqi’s laid the blame for their plight squarely on the United States. I am not surprised. I think the negative consequences of the invasion were predictable from the start.

And yet many intelligent people did not see it. George Bush, Dick Chaney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz – to name a few. The House and Senate voted overwhelmingly in favor of the invasion. I know international relations are complicated and I didn’t have the information then or now that government officials had and have, but it seemed like a no-brainer to me.

A man I know who is from the near east told me at the time that the Iraqis would not take kindly to foreign troops in their land – no matter how they felt about Saddam Hussein. That sounded reasonable to me because I knew I wouldn’t like it if foreign troops came to the United States - regardless of how I felt about the then current administration.

The point I’m trying to make here is what we had really was not a failure of intelligence – it was a failure of perspective.

That same broadcast last week showed film of two truck drivers being stopped by Sunni insurgents. The truck drivers claimed to be Sunnis but evidently failed to convince their captors. They were shot and killed. It seems that – at least sometimes – a lack of perspective can be dangerous.

It's a commonplace observation nowadays that our politics are growing increasingly polarized. There is gridlock in Washington and moderate incumbents are losing primary elections. Certainly it appears to me that political opinions are increasingly strident. I hear that Congress may "sue" the President. Elected representatives in Missouri and Texas are passing bills that would make it illegal for FBI, ATF, or Secret Service agents to enforce Federal laws in their states. Otherwise reasonable people speak of those who disagree with them in pejorative terms – nitwit, moron, crook, Nazi. Some on the right speak of "net takers" or the "undeserving" poor while some on the left lump all those with higher incomes and /or wealth together and vilify them as "the one percent."

It's easy, I think, to get frustrated if one considers seriously the state of our country – or of our planet. Our communities – our towns and cities, our states, our nations have problems crying out for solutions: flood, drought, tornadoes, hurricanes, rising temperatures, rising water, famine, human trafficking, mass incarceration, crime, poverty, inequitable justice systems, political disenfranchisement – the list goes on. Also, what one may see as solutions to these problems – population control, alternative energy sources, education of women, decriminalization of drugs, raising the minimum wage, liberalizing the bail system, expanding the political franchise, reforming the public schools – others may see as adding to our problems or making our current problems worse. From one perspective, the rich – in the form of big business and soulless corporations - conspire to influence elections and the government to increase their own wealth, decimate the middle class and further degrade the poorest among us. While from the opposite perspective, the nanny state encourages sloth and indolence and disincentivises the work ethic and creative spirit that made the US economy the envy of the world.

I'm not making this stuff up folks. I've heard the anger and frustration on both sides. I've heard it in kitchens, living rooms, back yards, state capitals, and in this very building. I've heard it said that most people deserve what they get – if they didn't want to be poor they should have studied harder in school, not taken so many drugs, not had so many kids, they should have got off their behinds and worked. I've also heard it said that CEO's and millionaires should be lined up and shot. These are not stupid people saying these things. These are people who are angry about the state of the country and the world and frustrated with those on the other side who just don't get it or who just don't care.

I worry when I hear these remarks. The stridency reminds me of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, Germany in the 20's and 30's. Then I think, surely, we're not there – at least not yet. But I still worry and I wonder what to do. There are people of good conscience on all sides who are sincere in their beliefs. So what do we do as Progressives, or as Conservatives – I shouldn't presume – but together as people who honor the worth and dignity of every human being? Can we do that without considering seriously their perspective? Mustn't we at least attempt to understand their point of view? Shouldn't we at least try to see from the other direction?

When I was a kid I wanted to be John Wayne – not the actor, but a John Wayne character. Strong, independent, self-reliant and unafraid. I absorbed the Protestant work ethic, (hard work, honesty), and the virtues of Adam Smith's capitalism (thrift, saving, and enlightened self-interest). By this I don't mean to say that I was overly fond of hard work or that I was unusually strong or independent. I just thought that I should be those things and I imagined what it would be like if I was. These are still, I think, the primary virtues of a politically conservative worldview. This narrative starts with the individual. If we all study hard, work hard, treat with one

another honestly, and each look out for our own long-term interest, then not only will we take care of ourselves and our families, but society itself will be better off. If society instead provides food and shelter and healthcare without charge to people who haven't earned it, we create a culture of dependence (we spoil the child as it were). We create a class of people who are not productive and make life more difficult for those who are, and society begins to collapse – or so the story goes.

An alternative narrative, of course, emphasizes our interdependence rather than our independence. We should, in this view, care for those less fortunate, and structure our institutions to support us all collectively. Instead of the limited rights not to be harmed in our life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, we should have as a group more positive rights – to eat healthy, to safe and secure shelter, to appropriate and timely health care, and to be treated respectfully by all. In this view, when individuals see it as a virtue to look out solely for themselves and their families and friends, greed becomes paramount and society devolves into a bitter struggle between economic classes.

I appreciate each of these stories. I was raised with the first, and know people of integrity who embody those “conservative” values, people who live by this story intentionally. The narrative provides structure and emotional security. It gives meaning to their lives. I've also come to recognize the worth of the other story. I learned it largely in this community. I know people who embody these values as well – Unitarian saints I call them – although I won't mention any names today. These folks go through life helping others; they support institutions that create bonds of community; they strive for justice for all, with particular emphasis for those less fortunate than they.

So here’s my main point, folks. I hope you saw it coming. It occurs to me that - though the perspectives are different – and the stories that provide meaning are different, the folks that embody those different stories in positive ways are not in many ways so very different from each other. Some of the hardest working people I know, the most honest and straightforward, the most independent and self-reliant the most frugal and thrifty (regular paragons of conservative values) are the very ones who believe in and work toward a world where we all are intentionally in this mess together, where we know we must help one another and we must create and nourish those institutions that bind us together and support our interdependence.

On the other hand, some of the most kind, generous, thoughtful people I know, people who give enormous amounts of time energy and money to make the world a better place see themselves as living a life of rugged independence. They believe the only way to save the world is by encouraging that sense of independence and self-reliance and by ending social programs they see as encouraging dependence and sloth. They want to help people in need, but they see it as dangerous for society if people believe they are entitled to the help.

I am caught between these stories - one that made me who I am and the other that gives me hope that humanity and our planet will survive this millennium. But I did not come here today to judge myself or anyone. And though I could and often do advocate for particular perspectives that I think will make the world better, rather today I come in the hope that I and each of us will breathe through our frustrations. I speak in the hope we will use our righteous anger as a chisel to build rather than a bludgeon to destroy, as a scalpel to heal rather than a knife to wound. I come in the hope that we see one another as human beings struggling daily not only for bread, but for meaning and worth in our lives. Amen.