

## **“A Conundrum” with Worship Associate David Fu**

**Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD**

**2/9/2025**

Last week was our first worship service with our anchor minister Pastor Lora Powell-Haney. She will be preaching on the first Sundays of each month as well as taking on Pastoral care duties during Reverend Jane’s sabbatical. I hope you got a chance to meet her. She delivered a lovely sermon on our February worship theme of Inclusion. She encouraged us, she implored us, I daresay she even inspired us, to “Widen Our Circles” in the spirit of Inclusion writ large.

And her message came with some hard truths: that the real work of inclusion is not easy, and that it is never done. It is not just hanging up a sign or declaring your intentions, however loudly or earnestly. It is not just *inviting* folks to join you. That’s the first part, and it is necessary, but, as we like to say in the math business, it is not sufficient. In the words of Verna Myers:

“Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.”

In our story for all ages this morning, Mullah Nasruddin was invited to the feast, along with everyone else in town. But no one made room for him, no one greeted him or even seemed to see him. No one “asked him to dance”, until he wore his fancy coat. His fancy coat. An external, soulless, lifeless piece of clothing. Are we really that shallow? Well, I say – sometimes, and maybe more than we realize, and definitely more often than we would like. Perhaps you are telling yourself, “I would never do that”, or “that would never happen here”, but don’t be so sure. There are many kinds of “fancy coats”, and we are all, after a fashion, more the magpie than we might admit.

I have a feeling that Mullah Nasruddin would be a wonderful soul with whom to engage, and I think it would be easy to widen my circle to include him. But what about the folks I don’t agree with?

What about people who behave toxically? What about the haters? Do I **have** to include them in my life, too? Do I **have** to even “invite them to the party”? Because I sure as heck do not want to dance with them. Do I **have** to?

Well, no. The only thing you **have** to do, as one of my wife’s high school teachers once said, is to die. But this way of thinking, to exclude those you perceive as haters, is the easy way out. One of my favorite subversives, mathematician, pianist, and satirist Tom Lehrer, on his 1965 album *That Was the Year That Was*, lays it out in fine form. I quote:

“... I’m sure we all agree that we ought to love one another, and I know that there are people in the world who do not love their fellow human beings, AND I HATE PEOPLE LIKE THAT!” End quote.

If you hate the haters, you become a hater yourself. Dehumanizing others dehumanizes ourselves. It may seem like haters are everywhere in our lives, but I would like to believe that the number of truly hateful people, the ones who crave naught but power and are completely without conscience, are actually relatively few in number; though these days it seems that they have very large megaphones, and they are causing a lot of trouble.

So what is a soul to do?

One thing that is definitely **not** the answer is, in the supposed interest of “staying informed”, to spend large amounts of time ingesting large amounts of news from the media and the internet, often referred to as “doom scrolling”. I believe that the amount of time one needs to spend in order to be aware of important events is measurable in minutes, not hours. Any more time than that only serves hatred. Doom scrolling makes it easier for hatred to win, because it increases fear and feelings of powerlessness.

I think part of the answer to the question “What’s a soul to do?” comes from this morning’s prayer by Reverend Gretchen Haley. Take refuge in and find strength in community, and embrace the good. I love the final words:

Claim here a resilient freedom:

The choice for love, for light,  
to live with joy and gratitude and praise  
as a form of resistance

Using religious language and tying this to Inclusion, I would say that Rev. Haley is urging us in this tumultuous time to remember to include God in our lives, and to not let the messages of hate grind you down. *Nolites te bastardes carborundorum.*

So there’s that. But what about engaging with someone who does not align with your ideals? Or even someone who may mean you harm? This is a trickier business, and I don’t have a lot to say right now, but I believe it is important to **try** to include such people. How? I’m not sure, but I do have another sermon slot in a couple weeks...

Yes, in all cases it is important to try. Are we always going to get it right the first time? No. The second time? No. In our call to worship this morning, Reverend Dr. David Breeden reminds us:

Do we fail?

Yes we do. Often.

Do we try again?

Yes we do, always.

One of my favorite stories about Jesus is from the book of Matthew 15:22-29. I'll warn you now that my interpretation of this story is likely blasphemous in several ways, and that I share it here, at Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist, without the slightest compunction. In this story, Jesus fails to have compassion several times, but he eventually comes around and does the right thing. A woman of Canaan, an outsider, not a Jew, comes and begs Jesus to heal her mentally ill daughter. Jesus ignores her. She begs his disciples, and they ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus says "I'm only here for the Jews." The woman of Canaan begs Jesus again. And this time his reply is downright nasty: "it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." Jesus refuses to widen his circle. And then this bolt from the blue:

**27** And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

You may call me a dog because I am not of your people, but I would be grateful for the smallest crumb of your compassion. This humble reply is actually a slap in the face. Jesus finally sees the light and heals the woman's daughter! Who saw this coming?

Another favorite story of mine from the New Testament about an outsider is that of the Good Samaritan. The Jewish man who is robbed, assaulted, and left to die on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is passed by, first by a priest, and then by a Levite (another Jewish holy person). It is a certain Samaritan, a non-Jew, who widens his circle and has compassion on the victim.

And so I have a question. Which came first, Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan, or his encounter with the Canaanite woman? It is not obvious, because the story of the Good Samaritan is only in Luke, and the story of the Canaanite woman occurs only in Mark and Matthew. I'm sure the biblical scholars could give me an answer, but I think it is interesting no matter which happened first. And, since I have the pulpit this morning, I'm gonna tell you why.

If Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan **after** his encounter with the Canaanite woman, then it shows a kind of personal growth: he has widened his circle with the woman, and he is teaching others by holding up the Samaritan as the hero of that story. Cool story, bro.

On the other hand, if Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan **before** his encounter with the Canaanite woman, then when he is denying her his help, he is failing to live up to the ideal of his own Good Samaritan story. And the woman's retort is actually the voice of God, giving Jesus the chance to see his hypocrisy and to come around. He does not pass it up. Of the two possibilities, I like this one better, because Jesus models how one can fail, even several times, but still eventually get it right.

So do I know how to widen my circle? I don't know. Maybe? But I do know that the important thing is to try, and even more importantly, to keep trying when I fail. If Jesus needed several chances to widen his circle, then I'm gonna give myself several chances, too. And I'll do it within and out from this Beloved Community. And I hope you will join me in doing so as well.

Amen