

“Dancing with Monsters” with Worship Associate David Fu

Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD

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Welcome to part two of my two part series on this month’s worship theme of Inclusion. What’s that? You missed part one? No worries! I’ll rehash a good bit of it this morning. And, you can also download the text of the sermon from our website, or, if you are feeling particularly ambitious, you can even watch the service on our YouTube channel. O brave new world, with such technology in it...

I’d like to explain today’s sermon title, “Dancing with Monsters?”. The last time I was in the pulpit, I shared these words of Verna Myers: “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” In the course of my sermon, I made the observation that it seems a heck of a lot easier to include those who share beliefs with me, those cut of a similar cloth, than those who are different from me. I raised the question of the hateful, and even those who would do us harm, asking, do I have to include them as well? Do I have to dance with them, the monsters? Because I sure as heck don’t want to. Citing a lack of gumption and other material to cover, and with an internal sigh of relief, I kicked the can on any further reflection. Well, two weeks have rather quickly gone by, and so here we are.

But first, an apology. Mea culpa. Latin for “I am culpable” – [raise hand up and say] Guilty! Guilty of what, you may ask? Well, of many things, actually, but what I’m referring to this morning is my usage of the reading “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” from Margaret Atwood’s novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in my last service without giving it a proper explanation. I was struggling to find a concise way to do so, and in the end, I lazily tossed it out, hoping that folks would get it. Maybe some did, but definitely some did not. And so, ironically, during a sermon about the importance of inclusion, I managed to exclude folks. Mea culpa.

So let's get this cleared up. The seemingly Latin phrase “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” is “translated” as “don’t let the bastards grind you down.” I say “translated”, because it is not actually Latin, but rather what is called Dog Latin, which is English made to sound like Latin by applying Latin conjugations and declensions. As it turns out, Atwood’s “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”, is actually a riff on another Dog Latin phrase, “Illegitimi non carborundum”, which has the same “translation”.

Very good. Now that we know what the phrase means, my plan is to recall it in the context of the February 9 service, and then I will (fingers crossed) seamlessly and gracefully move on with my thoughts for today.

So where were we, some 336 hours ago? Ah, yes, I was wondering what a soul is supposed to do in these times, when it seems that the forces of hatred and fear have grabbed the reins and are commencing to cause some real trouble.

My first suggestion was to avoid excessive news input. The forces of hatred and fear have found a perhaps unwitting ally in the 24-hour news cycle. In addition to limiting our exposure, I'll invoke this morning's prayer and say that we should remember that Love is Loud. We should remember to join our voices in making that holy racket.

Two weeks ago, I also took comfort in these final words of a prayer of Reverend Gretchen Haley.

Claim here a resilient freedom:

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

And I went on to 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. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.

So there's that. But what about engaging with someone who does not align with your ideals? That seems like a tricky business.

I want to share with you two more readings from this month's Soul Matters packet that address what I would call the shadow side of inclusion.

The first comes from Cole Arthur Riley. I quote "I'm beginning to think alienation and rejection are the two great persuaders of our own unloveliness. The cunning will wield them against you so that you acquiesce to the systems of a community in order to retain membership in it. Perhaps you know what it's like to need to believe a certain doctrine or creed so that you can belong in a spiritual space, or to vote a certain way to belong at the dinner table. When someone places your very belonging at stake, they are prodding an ancient wound. Not all belonging is salve." (end quote)

And this, from an engaging, 13 minute and 42 second TED Talk titled "Birds Aren't Real? How a Conspiracy Takes Flight" by Peter McIndoe. I quote "What if by talking to conspiracy

theorists like they're ignorant and stupid, we're actually pushing them farther away from the truth that we want them to see? Because what happens when someone tells you that you're stupid, you're all wrong, you're the problem? You'll feel judged and dismissed. And most importantly, you'll feel othered, which may lead you to look for safety in those who are like-minded... We have to consider that conspiracy theorists are not just joining these groups for no reason. They're getting rewards: things that we are all looking for, a sense of purpose, community... What if by addressing belief before belonging, we're starting the conversation at the wrong place? Instead of sitting in collective bewilderment and frustration about how these people could believe these things, these crazies, what if we first looked under the hood and thought about what made them vulnerable to this (mis)information in the first place? What might they be getting out of this that they're not getting in their everyday lives? How much does it have to do with a different truth, or how much does it have to do with the community that that truth brings? ...Let's direct our energy toward the crisis of belonging..." (end quote)

So what are my takeaways from these readings? One, our deep-seated, even innate need for inclusion, makes us vulnerable. We can be terrified of being excluded, and we will change or compromise our beliefs to fit in. Two, telling someone that they are stupid or crazy or ignorant or wrong is an act of exclusion. It is to tell that person that they do not belong among the sane, among the normal, among the reasonable, and so it should come as no surprise that such an action rarely, if ever changes minds or hearts; rather, it usually has the opposite effect.

So when I meet a person who thinks differently than I do, what do I do? I tread carefully. I don't usually engage in argument or political discussion. That won't be fruitful – and, frankly, that's not really my style. And I am on the lookout for opportunities to let my best self shine through.

In the end, I think it is good for my mental health to assume that most of those whom I perceive as haters or crazies are actually decent people who are scared, and, like all humans, have a deep-seated need to belong, to be included.

But what about someone who may mean you harm? This seems like an even trickier business. There are people who crave only power and cruelty, people without conscience and without compassion. Should I widen my circle to include them? Should I dance with them? Can I? [pause] For me, the short, and most honest answer is "I don't know". Frog and Toad did face real danger on their mountain climb, and I don't think they were wrong to run home and be afraid for a while. I don't know – but I do have another favorite story about monsters. It comes from John Steinbeck's novel, *East of Eden*.

This morning's first reading comes from the introduction to the novel's major character Cathy Ames. She is bad. Really bad. Really. Really. Bad. Steinbeck does an incredible job of portraying her as a brilliant "malformed soul" who has no ability to love.

Here are this morning's "talking points" about Cathy Ames, and I'll warn you that this is just the tip of the iceberg. As an adolescent, she murders her parents by locking them in the house while they sleep and then setting the house on fire. As a young woman, she falls in with a whoremaster named Mr. Edwards, who eventually becomes suspicious of her, investigates her past, and beats her severely, leaving her to die on the road. There she is found by the novel's protagonist, Adam Trask. Adam nurses her back to life, marries her, and impregnates her with twins. Remaining married and raising children are not part of Cathy Ames' plans, and just weeks after the infants are born, she announces her intention to leave. When Adam tries to stop her, she shoots him in the shoulder and vanishes from his life. She joins up with and then eventually runs a local house of ill repute, and brutally so.

Many years later, Adam finally hears about her whereabouts, and he comes to see her. Their conversation is amazing and compelling, with Cathy's darkness and cruelty on full display up against Adam's love and acceptance. My favorite part of the scene, the part that always brings me to tears, happens towards its end. Cathy, thinking that she will destroy his soul, reveals to Adam that his brother Charles may be the father of his children. After Adam's initial shock and disbelief, he has a moment of divine, Zen-like clarity: (I quote)

"It wouldn't matter—even if it were true," he said. "It wouldn't matter at all". And suddenly he laughed because he knew this was so.

(end quote). This moment is also an acknowledgement of love for Adam's brother, Charles, which makes this moment even more moving to me. Cathy does not react well, and when she responds by declaring her hatred for him, Adam again says, "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all", and "Do you know, I loved you better than anything in the world? I did. It was so strong that it took quite a killing."

I have a friend who feels that the character of Cathy Ames in *East of Eden* is just too "over the top". Surely, no one is *that* bad. These days, I'm not so sure. But Adam Trask played the Good Samaritan by bringing Cathy Ames into his life. And he loved her, not knowing her for the psychic monster that she was – even after she shot him. And when her true nature was finally revealed to him, he laughed; he loved his enemy, and he loved his life.

(As usual, Jesus)

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you;

Love your enemies. The iconic words of Jesus from the iconic Sermon on the Mount. This. This is Inclusion with a capital “I”. Inclusion “writ large”.

God includes everyone in their world. To love only your brethren, your family, your clan, is not enough – even the publicans, those Jews who collected taxes for the Romans, did that. And incidentally, even though Jesus seems to be dissing the publicans here, he actually widens his circle to include them on many occasions in the New Testament. Yes, to include everyone is to be God-like. God as the sun shines on the evil and the good, and God as the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Can we do it? I hope so, and I believe we are honor bound to try.

And when things go wrong, when we fail, when we get hurt. May God give us the courage – to try again.

Amen