

God Who is Always Opening to Us, Beckons Us to be Open to Each Other
Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Oh God of Love
Open unto me — light for my darkness.
Open unto me — courage for my fear.
Open unto me — peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me — thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

Adapted from Howard Thurman

Since the death of my mother years ago, polarization and high conflict has visited my family of origin from time to time. We are very different people with very different political and religious persuasions, from abortion rights to LGBTQ inclusion, from patriarchy and women in the priesthood, to our understandings about who God is. We also share a history of trauma with the death of my brother as a toddler, followed by my father's tragic accident and death, four years later. Somehow, that trauma and unresolved grief can still get activated, and when it does, all hell breaks loose. Add to that, the fact that the various cultural leanings and group identities of my remaining siblings is split, two to two. The two who lean in a fundamentalist direction went to rock concerts and peace and civil rights marches in the 60s! They inspired my sense of activism. What happened? And what a mix!

At an annual July 4th family gathering a number of years ago, the arguments became increasingly intense, and resulted in nobody listening to each other. Accusations and assumptions were hurled and we started spewing simple binaries, all followed by withdrawal. We were seriously stuck. My 8-year-old daughter Emma, a child who was loved and nourished by this community of God's all-inclusive love, stepped in with a letter to one of my sisters. This is what she wrote:

Dear auntie,
How are you? I have been thinking about the differences in our family.
I know you are a republican and I am a democrat, but I know we agree on some things.
We agree that God loves everyone, and that no one should live on the streets. I know we think everyone should be able to see a doctor whether they are poor or not. We both think that everyone should love one another, and that no should tell someone else who to love. I know you are a good person and you care about people just as much as me and my mom. I hope you are having a good day and I can't wait to see you at Thanksgiving.
I love you!
Emma
P.S. Happy Ramadan!

Well, my friends, that re-started a dialogue and healing in my family. Emma modeled for the adults a way to hold unity across diversity, without losing her own voice.

Our lives are always in movement, from moment to moment. Life changes, we change, those around us change, sometimes unexpectedly. At times, our path is smooth but it always has a mix of hills and valleys, and our awareness of where we are going and what is happening within us and around us, varies. Sometimes, we get stuck by one thing or another, like my family, and it's difficult to move in any direction. We lose our flow, and are unable to find it. This can happen when we find ourselves in conflict. It can help us to regain our flow, if we have tools to deal with conflict in a healthy way. Conflict is a vital and an important part of life in relationships and community. In fact, conflict helps us learn and grow into the full people God longs for us to be.

Healthy conflict can be vigorous and passionate without losing sight of the humanity and complexity of the other person or group. In vitalizing conflict, we resist categorizing people or ideas into simple binaries. We recognize that there is more to any human being than our perceptions. When we are curious and open to learning, good conflict does not collapse into caricature. In healthy conflict, all sides want to find a solution. There is an openness to the truth that none of us has all the answers, and there is more interest in finding a solution, than in being right.

Good conflict is vital to community. Without it, we can become ingrown and insular. Unfortunately, conflict that shifts into high or toxic conflict, can become destructive. It is what happens when people and perspectives get simplified into categories, the kind of feud with an "us" and a "them." When conflict escalates past a certain point, the conflict itself takes charge. Cognitive biases and self-protection keep the conflict going. We become rigid and lose sight of important details. At that point, the conflict becomes its own reality. The original facts that led to the dispute fade as curiosity declines and assumptions take over. Space for creative compromise collapses. High conflict situations are marked by rumors and myths, and certitude reduces complexity into radically simplified binaries. Remember that rumors can kill.

We can even start to believe that we know one another without actually knowing one another at all. We use words like "always," and "never," "she is only reacting that way because she's a democrat or a republican", we say. Unhealthy conflict generates deep resentment and distrust, as winning becomes more important than a common good. Not good!

Let's talk about healthy conflict. In the case of healthy conflict, there is movement, questions get asked, curiosity exists, and there can be passion and anger also. Healthy conflict leads somewhere. There is a flow. Whereas, in high conflict, the conflict itself is the destination. Dominating power-over is the goal and there's nowhere else to go. We are stuck.

How do we get stuck? Our need to matter underlies all kinds of group conflict.

The groups we identify with give us a sense of belonging, *and* group identities are complicated, powerful forces. They give us structure, safety, and purpose, and make great accomplishments possible, like the Safe Haven here at ASC, or the world series.

However, when fear gets ignited, our identities can feel vulnerable, and those group identities can become more important to us than the well-being of the whole. Our understanding of our fundamental interdependency fades. We stop asking questions, we stop listening. We insist that we know what is best and we slip into binary, categorical thinking. Under the influence of categories, we are less likely to cooperate with the other group and more likely to become hostile. We doggedly protect ourselves and our group's identity regardless of the cost. We forget that we all belong to one another, as God's family, and that our only true and secure identity and importance rest secure as God's beloved. When this happens, we hurt each other deeply.

High conflict is the invisible hand of our time. We are surrounded by it in our country and many parts of the world. "Conflict entrepreneurs" intentionally stoke rival identities to boost their own popularity and power, inciting contempt and turning neighbors on neighbors. Do you notice who delights in each new plot twist of a feud? Who is quick to validate every lament and to articulate wrongs no one else has even thought of? Fire starter leaders seize the opportunities embedded in conflict and turn them to their advantage. Identity manipulation is very hard to resist, given our basic wiring as humans. We can quickly sink into frustration and blame, and that causes us to dig in.

The resulting polarization is all around us, and our beloved community of All Saints is not immune to it. There is conflict and hurt among us. This gives us the opportunity to lean in and listen to one another, or to polarize! If we continue to open ourselves, we can learn, grow through the pain, resist us vs them, and avoid fracture.

People do escape high conflict. Individuals—even entire communities—find ways to short-circuit the feedback loops of toxic conflict. It is not that they suddenly agree, nor do they defect. Instead, they do something much more interesting: they become capable of comprehending that with which they still disagree. It can change everything. Like someone who learns a second language, they start to hear the other side without compromising their own beliefs. Curiosity returns. Humanity revives. Conflict becomes necessary and good, instead of just draining.

There are paths through difference and conflict that address everybody's deepest needs. We cannot give in to my way or the highway. We heed and care for the pain of each other, and particularly of those who have been marginalized. It's not an either/or! To listen and check for understanding is probably the single best way to keep conflict healthy, all through life. It doesn't mean we agree. Instead, we investigate the under-story, and go deeper in a conversation, curious about what lies underneath what is being said. We tolerate tension and discomfort, seeking solutions that include everybody. That's what healthy families do!

This is why Trinity Sunday could not have fallen on a better day! On this day, those in our family of faith, sit in the awe and mystery of our three in one God who is perfect unity across diversity. Christ, in Jesus, is God, the Spirit is God, not as a single entities, but as part of the whole, all One yet eternally distinct. It's hard for us to comprehend in part because we are surrounded by a culture of individualism and self-determination, in which we are always afraid of losing ourselves. Einstein called our cultural individualism, an optical illusion. Studies of human development tell us, and emergent systems relevant to any scientific discipline today concur that although we are each unique creations of God, we develop only as a me in relationship with everything and everyone else. The deepest reality of the universe is ubuntu, I am because you are. It is an illusion, and a dangerous and destructive one, that our way, separate from the wellbeing of every other human being or perspective, is the right way.

I have always appreciated Richard Rohr's image of God as a waterwheel of love, one person always fully self-emptying to the other in a flow without beginning or end. God is self-giving love and God's all mighty power is the same outpouring love one person to another all one. I lead you, God says, with human ties, with bonds of love. I am to you like those who lift babies to their cheeks. I bend down and feed you. I am the womb of creation, She says, who counts every tear and keeps them in a flask close to her breast. God is not coercive. God does not use power over us but nurtures and woos us into alignment with God's love.

The gospel reading today is called the great commission, in which Jesus calls his disciples to go beyond their group identity to baptize and make disciples of all nations. Unfortunately, this commission to step beyond cultural group identity, was co-opted and defined by the church that just could not move beyond tribal identity. Brutal suppression of difference, forced confessions, and colonizing litter our history in the church. We can still miss the point. Jesus, taught us to, "leave the tribal identity behind. Proclaim the good news that God dwells in all of creation and every human being. To baptize everyone is to say that they are God's beloved." We don't need to look alike, act alike or believe the same things. God calls us to radical hospitality. God's presence is everywhere and it is God's presence we honor, especially in conflict, even when it is not visible to us.

Jesus invites us to give ourselves over to love, not to compete, but to complete each other, in the image of our God. We must be the guardians of God's Spirit within us and all around us, curious and open to each other especially in conflict; celebrating difference and living into our common identity as the beloved of God. Then we expose the pretense of dominative power for the impotence that it is. What if we were to hear our God who is unity across diversity, calling us to model that oneness in this moment, in our community, in our nation? What if we were to trust that God's power is our self-giving? What might happen if we pause and ask ourselves what God is birthing at this moment of conflict and pain? We might truly achieve at one ment, atonement for the ways we hurt each other. Conflict is not representative of failure, but rather opportunity for all of us to build something stronger.

In any true love, there is excess energy that always wants to flow beyond ourselves.

God who is Love, awakens our souls to which we cling like the splendid mortal creatures that we are, and asks us to let go, *not of conflict*, but of fear and tribal identities. We can only keep from getting stuck by helping each other.

During a year of cancer treatments, poet Christian Wiman wrote, "I cannot speak for other people. I only know that I did not know what love was until I encountered One that kept opening and opening and opening. And until I acknowledged that what the love was opening onto, and into was God."

The God who is always opening to us, beckons us to open to each other. Only then can we become the beloved community that meets our deepest desires.
May God help us to flow like a great river.

Amen.