

“Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are”
September 26, 2010

Rev. Kathryn Ellis

This morning, our message is about community, spiritual growth and the importance of Covenant Groups at Restoration. Covenant groups are our small groups for deepening connection and for spiritual growth. And I do mean our message, a little later Chris MacDonald-Dennis will testify to the impact covenant groups made in his life. In Covenant Groups, we are seen and recognized. We see others, hear each other's stories and we create connection. For me, it is the connection with others which makes clear the connection with the sacred.

At some time in our lives, all of us have experienced being an outsider, feeling excluded, not welcome. Even within church communities, we can feel too different, lonely or isolated. I know that people at Restoration have experienced disrespect, not being really heard. When people first visit a religious congregation, they are not asking, “What do these people believe?” No, they are asking, “Will I be welcomed? Will I fit in? Can I really be myself and also be part of this community?”

I am reminded of an extreme negative example of our need for connection. The opposite of what Covenant Groups do. Early in my career, I worked as a crisis intervention counselor at a mental health hospital. A Mennonite man had a mental breakdown and was admitted to the hospital. He was in deep despair.

What happened to him was that he had a disagreement with his bishop. In the old order communities, no one is supposed to disagree with the bishop. I heard another man say that the bishop told him not to think and not to ask questions. In these conservative communities, one is not supposed to find new ways.

Here at Restoration, in Covenant Groups, indeed in all Unitarian Universalist communities, we want you think, to ask questions, and to express your ideas. You can certainly disagree with me. Indeed, I expect some disagreement! But in the conservative Mennonite community, that's not the expectation. The bishop was displeased, and he ordered the community to shun the man. And so they did, the whole small community, his church, his family, even his wife and his children.

To shun him meant that they did not make eye contact, they did not speak to him and they did not respond to him. He lived in his own home and people moved about him as if he did not exist. He had food, clothing, shelter and work. He was safe. He was not homeless. He couldn't cope. I imagine no one of us could really cope. I imagine that I would begin to feel as if I wasn't real. Imagine his increased effort just to get a response.

As humans, we need each other. We need eye contact. We need to know that we've been heard. We need touch. We know who we are because of our interactions with other people. I know that I certainly need others and need human contact. Generally, I will not wear a robe or stole to lead worship. This morning I am wearing this

stole to share it with you. It was given to me last Sunday by congregations that I have served. It was given to me as they sent me out to minister to you. To me, it represents how I have been formed by my communities and my relationships. It represents how I and all of us will continue to evolve through our life experiences and our relationships.

Eventually, the Mennonite man's story led to a better place, but only when his story was heard. He could really heal only when he could find a community of love, kindness and acceptance, a place where he was allowed to think for himself and to try new ways.

Ubuntu is a Zulu word which means "I am because we are" or it could be translated as "humanness." We grow through our connection and interaction with others. We humans do not exist as solitary creatures. We are born into family, into community. "I am because we are." The Mennonite man was denied his very humanity.

South African Nobel Laureate, Archbishop Tutu said,

We say in our African idiom, "A person is a person through other persons." The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. I need you in order to be me as you need me in order to be you. We are caught up in a delicate network of interconnectedness. I have gifts that you don't, and you have gifts that I don't and voila! We are made different so that we may know our need of one another. The completely self-sufficient human being is sub-human. Thus diversity, difference is the essence of who we are."

Tutu described Ubuntu in this way:

It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them."

This is what Restoration's Covenant Groups are about, our way, perhaps, of living ubuntu, connecting more deeply, learning more about ourselves as we listen to and learn about others. I think we learn more about what is holy for us and what is genuinely sacred to us. In covenant groups, we can learn to express and articulate those things that we hold most dear. We can support each other in finding ways to live our values. We do this not by agreeing with each other but by listening to each other and by really seeing each other.

Covenant groups are not new to Unitarian Universalism. Small groups have been important in our history for a long time. UU minister Alice Blair Wesley wrote about the 1637 founding of the Dedham Massachusetts church which became a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

She wrote “*Show me the patterns of your church organization and I’ll show you what the people of the church find most worthy.*”ⁱⁱⁱ The 17th century people of Dedham organized themselves around covenant groups.

The Dedham people started with small group meetings. They set up weekly neighborhood meetings to “*lovingly discourse and consult together . . . and prepare for spiritual communion.*”^{iv} They held these weekly meetings for a full year. They agreed that people would speak their own truths and doubts. They were to listen and not to argue. “*So it were humbly and with a teachable hart not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting.*” . . . The record reports that all their ‘*reasonings*’ were ‘*very peaceable, loving and tender, much to edification.*’^v So they met peaceably for a year, speaking their own truths and listening lovingly.

Wesley talked about key patterns she found in the Dedham records. Here are some that I think still fit our Unitarian Universalist identity:

1. The spirit of love is at the heart of the free church. They thought “the desire for a ‘*further and nearer union and communion*’ of love (was) the one good reason for founding” or joining a congregation.^{vi}
2. “Loyalty to the spirit of love . . . commits members . . . to *the best understanding of truth we can attain.*”^{vii}
3. “*Reasoning together about what we love*”^{viii} was essential for them.
4. To join the congregation was to make a promise. It was a simple promise but not an easy one, a promise to “*be in intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster.*”^{ix}

The covenant they made, the promises they made were about how to live in community. They promised to do their best to live loving lives with integrity. Like this congregation, the Dedham folks “*understood the role of the church as filling the needs of both the members and the larger community.*”^x

Chris can you come up now and tell us about your covenant group experience?

Ubuntu: I am because we are. A person is a person because of others. Being with others. It's about “*discovering and building our connection with each other.*”^{xi} Ubuntu honors the dignity of every person and affirms the primary importance of relationships. The hallmark of ubuntu is about listening to and affirming others with the help of processes that create trust, fairness, shared understanding and dignity and harmony in relationships. May we live ubuntu, needing to be with others and being more and more who we can be through others.

May it be so. May you live in blessing.

ⁱ Found @ www.inwardoutward.org, from an address at the University of Toronto February 16, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu quoted @ www.buzzle.com/editorials/7-22-2006-103206.asp

ⁱⁱⁱ Wesley, Alice Blair. *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures, The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2002, p.36.

^{iv} Wesley, p. 18.

^v Wesley, p. 19.

^{vi} Wesley, p. 36.

^{vii} Wesley, p. 37.

^{viii} Wesley, p. 37.

^{ix} Wesley, p. 38.

^x Wesley, p. 21.

^{xi} Nussbaum, Barbara @ www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=20359 , p. 5.