

## The Dignity of Difference

“Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another,” writes the Roman Jew later converted the Apostle Paul, “But resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.”

That is one tall order, my friends! In today’s world of internet trolling, social media take-downs, passing judgement on one another and violent behavior – at least in the American culture – is a national pastime. Each day we say to ourselves “it can’t get worse than this – and it does. Everyone does it, so it must be just “the way things are.” From the White House to houses of worship, from Wall Street to Main Street, Nantucket, and everywhere between.

I have fallen into the habit of judging others as well. Yes, the one who has taught and preached that we can and should disagree with others but we should not be disagreeable. We should challenge others with whom we disagree but not disrespect them.

While serving a Church in Southern California, in the middle of the San Fernando Valley, we had frequent visits from homeless people looking for shelter, food, and money. One day the office building’s door bell rang. I could hear the office administrator open the door to a man looking for help. She came to my office door, rolled her eyes and said, “Another guy looking for help.” We were averaging 2-3 such visitors each week. “He needs \$10 for gas money.”

I reached in my pocket and all I had was a \$20. “Give him this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, give him this.”

When she went back to give him the \$20 he thanked her profusely, saying “I promise to bring you the change.” and left. The Administrator came to my office door and put her head in “He said he’ll bring you the change”

“I doubt that, but hopefully he will actually spend it on gasoline.” Perhaps a realistic thing to say but hardly respectful.

Not an hour later, the office doorbell rang and the man was back, and passed our administrator the \$10 in change. She thanked him and he said, “thank you so much for your help and for trusting me”

It's a simple story, but taught us a lesson in how easily we rob others of their humanity, most out of prejudice and fear.

*Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another.*

What concerns me and anyone else who subscribes to treating others first and foremost with dignity is that indignity happens everywhere. Given the right situation, the right moment, we seem willing and to demean others.

Last week in our Inquirer Mirror it was stated that the hate crime perpetrated on the African Meetinghouse over a year ago is still unsolved. Most of us have had forgotten it, or accepted this is a regrettable "part of life here," as if it's something new, when we know better. It's been around for centuries. Read your Nantucket history.

Abe Lincoln's words during his second inauguration are eloquent if not many, unrealistic. We need to encourage each other to rely on "the better angels of our nature," Or, as former first lady Michelle Obama has stated "When they go low, we go high."

It's not a hope for uniformity of thought or opinion, we know there ARE differences in opinion, in political allegiances, and in religious ethic. It is a matter of pushing against the deeply-engrained human propensity to divide ourselves into those we judge acceptable and those we judge as beyond the pale. And when we give into this tendency any sense of dignity is lost, and our humanity becomes like a cloud which blocks out the light of the human soul.

There are ample illustrations of this human inclination in our political rhetoric. Immigrants labeled as criminals, Muslims deemed terrorists, women demeaned and diminished in outrageous decisions about their bodies being made by state governments. African-Americans are still victims of racist stereotyping. Liberal and progressive people are deemed "elitists" by almost half of the country and conservatives are labelled "deplorable." Any hint of shared national purpose or shared empathy and understanding, is tossed aside, or not wanted.

Niraj Choksi in an article in the New York Times last year, reported on a phenomenon called "group status threat," a phenomenon in which white males feel they are losing dominance in an increasingly diverse

demographic reality. They shutter to think that within 25-30 years there will be no majority ethnic or racial group in our country.

While there are still pockets (and large ones in some quarters), where it is acceptable to speak sexist, racial, and derogatory language.

I have hope for a growing religious sentiment to reject outright, such hurtful and divisive language.

But the politics still offered in too many quarters plays on fears, specifically fear of the “other.” When we engage in such behavior it builds walls, walls based on fear, based on prejudice, based on unfounded anxieties based on a faulty and short-sighted view of the religion’s purposes I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard all I can stand on building walls these days. On keeping people detained, in unspeakable conditions.

A hateful kind of tribalism has shown its ugly head again in parts of our country and some religious people, motivated not by faith, but by fear of demographic shifts, are circling the wagons to protect themselves and the status quo.

Misinterpretation of sacred texts of Judaism, Islam, Christian, and a host of other religions -continue - after centuries of clarification -to stand in the way of making peace among those who follow Yahweh, Allah, Buddha, God, and or any number of other divine personalities or ideals. I am sure it would not surprise you to know that in the first centuries of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, right up to this very day 85% of all wars in the world are religiously motivated.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states in his book, “The Dignity of Difference,” that religion is still the most powerful institution in the world and has a major part to play in this cultural of indignity. “We cannot build our future on hatreds of the past, not can we teach them to love the divine in life by loving people less.”

So here is my plea to you here this morning:

--let us not forget that we were all strangers to this land once, so we must not live in fear of those who are different from us.

-let us not forget that the commandment to love one another is in every sacred text of every major world religion, and it includes every one, even

those beyond our own circles. The immigrant seeking a new home (as your grandparents and mine did), those refugees fleeing violence, those homeless poor knocking at our doors.

- let us not forget that all religious sensibilities have the ability and history to inspire and transform, and transform we must else our faith becomes complacent and therefore complicit.

-let us not forget that pursuing justice, like pursuing peace often entails challenging the status quo and requires us to resist and disturb the dominant ethos. The path is difficult to take, especially for those who benefit most from the status quo.

-let us not forget that advocating for the dignity of difference is a high and noble calling – and it begins in your life and mine, in our community, and this and every other religious community.

-let us not forget that we were never called into a religious or spiritual life to be "normal." The religious life is not normal. you are not normal. I've had different reactions to that statement when I've said it in recent years in to congregations in different parts of the country. Some have looked at each other and clearly upset that I would even dare to call them "abnormal."

But I've also been surprised that is more than a couple churches the people got it. They understood that to be normal was much too accommodating for their understanding of their own sacred texts. In one church it took the congregation a second or two after I said to them, "You do know you're not normal, right?" Several moments later they cheered and clapped!

-So...Let us be abnormally kind, abnormally just, abnormally respectful, and loving, and show this world we live in and this community that we love, that making a new normal is what we are all about. And it's not even remotely like the new normal we are enduring right now.