

From the Pastor's Desk

Building Bridges

While in the seminary, I sometimes prayed in the choir loft. It was right outside my second floor dorm room and in eight or ten steps I could be in the loft. I remember sitting there contemplating spiritual things when I saw Dennis walk down the main aisle and kneel in the front pew. He was Italian and his mouth often moved faster than his mind. There was nothing he didn't have an opinion about and had no problem sharing it with others. Being a quiet reserved person of German descent, I found myself irritated by his bombastic tirades about this or that subject. Now, there he was all by himself, or so he thought, in the front pew.

I was a contemplative and welcomed spending time alone in prayer. Every Thursday at 10:00 PM a faculty member conducted a short prayer service. After the service, we seminarians were invited to spend anywhere from a few minutes to midnight in quiet prayer. Normally by 11:00 PM most left the chapel. Dennis never lasted more than fifteen minutes. I enjoyed the quiet and sometimes stayed until midnight for the final benediction.

I secretly admired Dennis. I envied his self confidence and ability to proclaim what he thought with ease, while in the midst of other seminarians. I, on the other hand, felt more like a mouse in a corner, dreading my next sermon, which had to be proclaimed in front of people like Dennis who seemed so confident.

So there I was, perched in the choir loft looking down on him. I felt confident in my judgment of his inability to spend time in quiet prayer. "Why is he in the seminary?" I thought. "He lacks the interior life necessary for the priesthood."

The next year, I moved to the same floor as Dennis, away from my easy perch in the choir loft where I could gaze down upon others. To my surprise, he invited me into his room to have coffee in the mornings and I found myself belly laughing with his other Italian friends. I got to know Dennis and he got to know me. He even invited me to his home. When I arrived, I was met by his father who kissed me on both cheeks before I got in the door! I felt guilty about judging Dennis and saw it as a matter for confession.

A bridge was built when I moved to the same floor as Dennis. I could have stayed in my room on the floor outside the choir loft and continued to take delight in my superiority as I gazed down upon others. But moving to another floor changed my life for which I am forever grateful. I began to see myself for what I was: A judgmental spiritual snob. It wasn't easy looking in the mirror, but it was true. Sin cut right through my heart.

Building bridges is not easy and associating with those whom we dislike is difficult. But Jesus, the man for others, beckons us to move out of our comfort zones.

We live in a world of suspicion and harsh judgment. In the midst of a country founded upon freedom, we find ourselves locked behind walls of anger and resentment toward those with

other political, moral or religious views. The more justified and secure we feel in our judgmentalism, the higher the walls that separate us. Behind these walls, if truth be told, we are trembling, fearful of what our world has become.

If we are honest, we will admit that we have contributed to the creation of this environment in which we find ourselves. We enjoy sitting in our comfortable perch with our familiar surroundings, feeling superior and looking down upon others. Yet, we know that our inflexibility is part of the problem.

And what has our society become? Toxic. We have rendered it a toxic waste. Our hatred has polluted our environment. Republicans hating Democrats. Democrats hating Republicans. Christians hating Muslims. Our hatred is pollution we've created in which our children and grandchildren are forced to live.

We can't even properly govern ourselves anymore.

So, why do we continue to do this?

In one word, Fear. We fear the people we judge and think that if our world-view changes we will die, or at a minimum, suffer. It reveals the little people that we are. We relish believing we have all the truth and others need to bow to our superiority. Sadly, we have been willing to ride this sense of superiority to the summit of the abyss in which our society finds itself.

Fear is an awful thing. It locks us up with the demonic. Fear, in the history of humanity, is the foundation of hatred, which has caused unthinkable atrocities. Behind the sunglasses and military uniform of Muammar Gaddafi was a little man full of fear. It was this fear that caused him to kill his own citizens.

A solution of course, is for us to confront our fears. In fact, I think this is one of the main reason we are here on earth—to confront our fears and overcome them with love. It entails a spiritual evolution that is very profound. Rather than fear-based, we become love-based.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him

and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10: 25-37

The true neighbor, Jesus tells us, is the one who extends love that heals wounds caused by hate. It's not an easy love, but a love that requires sacrifice and a great deal of effort. It's worth noting that the one who expressed love was not part of the establishment, but was an outsider, a Samaritan.

Recently Mark Hanson, the presiding Bishop of the ELCA said that in this age of suspicion and polarization he hopes individuals and congregations will be bridge builders. Can you step outside the establishment and build a bridge from hatred to love, or has hatred become your home? The future of our society rests on all of us to let go of hatred and embrace love.

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