

Shared Desire

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
June 13, 2021

Ancient Witness: Luke 22:39-42

Many of you know that I have worked as a social worker at a halfway house in Cincinnati for a few years. And I can tell you that it could be very challenging work.

First, there was the bureaucracy of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the requirements, including knowing the inmates' whereabouts every hour of every day. And especially after a tragic murder, apparently committed by a resident of a different halfway house, there was extra pressure on all halfway houses.

And the inmates, or the clients, themselves could be very challenging. Sometimes they could be aggressive. Sometimes they had significant issues to overcome, such as illiteracy, drug addiction, mental health problems, no place to live or support system. They participated in the halfway house program because they could receive a significant reduction in their prison sentence, sometime years. The Bureau of Prisons (B.O.P.) required that they find full employment within 45 days or be sent back to prison, and that could be very difficult for someone with a record and not many job skills. And almost always the men had problems breaking the rules—being deceptive and taking risks that they would not get caught. I'm not really a suspicious person, but working there made me very suspicious because they were always trying to be slick and get away with stuff. And this was very challenging to me.

I found that it was very important to maintain respectful professional boundaries. I addressed each one as Mr. Jones or Mr. Smith, and I learned to expect that they might lie and deceive—not to have unrealistic expectations.

But I also learned a lot there. I saw men overcome huge obstacles against all odds to pull together their lives. Each one of them changed me in some way, as I got to know them.

I may have told you about this great documentary movie called, "The Dhamma Brothers," that was about a program that brought Vipassana meditation techniques to a prison in Alabama. It came out a number of years ago, and you might be able to find it on Youtube now. And there was a statement by a prison reform advocate that has stayed with me through the years:

Everyone is more than the worse thing they've ever done.

Each inmate, each client I worked with had a label: "drug dealer," "bank robber," etc. And it's true that this was *part* of who they were, but they were not just the worst thing that they had ever done. This is one very important thing that I experienced as I worked with them and got to know them.

And so part of my challenge was to get beyond the worse part of them and connect with the other part. This is important not just in our interaction with others, realizing that nobody is just the worse thing they have ever done, that everyone has value and goodness and redemptive qualities and potential. But this is

also important as we deal with *ourselves*. Sometimes we are harder on ourselves than others, and it is difficult for us to see that we are more than the worse thing we've ever done, more than our failures.

I know the struggle with this. When I had my falling out with the Presbyterian denomination and Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, the only thing I was left with was a small, poor congregation in a storefront in the inner city with a half-time salary. And I will always be grateful for that. But it was difficult. Financially it was quite hard, but emotionally it was extremely difficult. All that training, all those years of experience, all that work, not worth anything. I could have found a different church job if I looked beyond Cincinnati, but I had two teenage kids that I couldn't leave. So I stayed, and I went out looking for two years to try to find something to supplement my church job, something with health insurance. Nothing. I had no other qualifications, no other credentials. Finally, I found that job as a case manager that some described as entry level. It was a position at which many new college graduates would turn up their noses. And most of those that tried didn't last very long. It was a very hard, low-paying job. And through all that, I struggled with my own sense of failure and underachievement.

And all I can say is that I tried to see in myself that I was more than this, more than the worse thing I've done, more than my own failure and underachievement. Even though I lost my career for taking a principled stand of solidarity with gay and lesbian people, for engaging in disobedience to further the cause of justice, my circumstances still *felt* like failure. Sometimes the nagging voices could be relentless, making the worst thing more difficult to deal within myself than with others.

So how can we get past the worst in each other and help each other change? Here's one method: *find out what desires you share*.

There was one counseling technique we used in social work called "motivational interviewing" that involved helping the client discover those motives within himself that were positive and pro-social, and then work with those motives.

As their case manager, it was often adversarial. The clients didn't want to be there and were there largely against their will. We had to hold them accountable and had to make sure they were following strict rules to the letter and impose discipline if necessary. We were often seen as the enemy. The default mode was that the staff were trying to enforce the rules, which the clients hated and thought were unfair, and which they resisted and disobeyed.

Once I had this very large, very tough, very strong African American man sitting across from me. He was talking to me, quite agitated, and used this phrase, "you feel me?" (Kind of like, "you know what I mean?") There's something strange to have this big, imposing guy like that say, "you feel me?"

And "feeling him" is about the last thing I had on my mind. He had earlier come to me with a lot of attitude—hostility, contempt, aggression—and what I'm feeling is some caution and some anger. And I'm reading his file that has some pretty scary stuff in there.

But then, after I get past my frustration, fear and anger with him, I do feel him. And I think of our *shared desire* and talk to him about it. I said, "Look, here's what we both want—I'm not against you—we both want you not to get incarcerated again, for you to have a crime-free life, for you to be able to provide for yourself and your family, for you to have a good and happy life—we both want this. Right? Let's figure out how we can get there. I know the program is hard and that the rules can be B.S., but I want you to complete it and not get sent back to prison." And I could see his whole attitude and perspective *shift*.

And so I help him fill out his job-seeking itinerary because his spelling is horrible, and I help him read the bus schedule and figure out how to navigate around. My point is that figuring out our shared desires is not just important for my clients therapeutically, *it's important for me.*

For me, discovering shared desire makes the world a less threatening and frustrating place. The world seems like a more friendly place.

I think that this is part of what Jesus was about—helping people discover their shared desires, shared interest, shared destiny. Jesus was in touch with what people wanted and needed, from the lowest to the highest, and he advocated that we act with this in mind. “Love even your enemy as yourself,” he said. Everyone is more than the worst thing they’ve ever done. There’s a place where you can connect. You have a shared desire with everyone. And you can find it, if you try.

This reminds me of those science fiction movies when the aliens invade and try to take over the earth. Suddenly all enmity falls away and animosity between countries and races gives way to a shared desire of well-being, and everyone bands together to fight them off. And I think to myself that it’s too bad we need invading aliens from outer space to wake us up.

From a broader perspective, a motivational interview and inventory needs to happen in this nation. With the class war being waged by the wealthy and powerful elite upon the poor and middle class, and the growing chasm between the extremely rich and everyone else. As a nation, we need to find, it seems to me, our shared desire to avoid social disintegration and the loss of democracy with the emergence of an oligarchy. And we need to put that shared desire for a healthy, vibrant, equal society of shared prosperity at the top of our list. A few years ago, I read a quote from Peter Georgescu, former CEO of Young and Rubicam. He said,

I'm scared. The billionaire hedge funder Paul Tudor is scared. My friend Ken Langone, a founder of Home Depot, is scared. So are many other chief executives. Not of Al Qaeda, or the vicious Islamic State or some other evolving radical group from the Middle East, Africa or Asia. We're afraid of where income inequality will lead.

This awareness that income inequality and the continued concentration of wealth and political power is disastrous for the nation and a shared desire to heal this is a small step in the right direction.

And likewise from an even broader perspective, when it comes to the environment and the well being of the planet, it seems to me, we need to get in touch with our shared desire to heal and protect the earth, and to place this desire at the top of the list.

In today’s passage from Luke’s gospel, Jesus is struggling with his own anxiety and fear. He doesn't want to die. He’s aware of the threat that he’s facing. And yet he also wants to remain true to his calling and to his teaching about a Divine Reality that calls us to transformation. And so he comes out on the other end of this with an affirmation: “Not my will but thy will be done.”

In other words, Jesus is focusing on finding that desire he shares with the heart of the universe, the desire he shares with all things, the desire he shares with his highest self.

This reminds me of the loving-kindness meditation, a version of the Metta Sutta of the Buddhist tradition: First with oneself: May I be safe; may I be happy and contented; may I be healthy and whole.

Then with family and friends: May they be safe; may they be happy and contented; may they be healthy and whole. They with strangers and even enemies: May they be safe; may they be happy and contented; may they be healthy and whole. How incredible it would be to have the world practicing this meditation, each articulating a shared desire of well being for the other. And finally for all beings, the entire planet: May they be safe; may they be happy and contented, may they be healthy and whole.

The question, “You feel me?” is a great question. Try it. Because that’s what loving-kindness and compassion is all about: “to feel with” others and to discover our shared desire—to desire the well-being and happiness of each other.

And so I’ll end with part of the poem, “Kindness,” by Naomi Shihab Nye

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
you must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.*