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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Philippians 4: 8-9; John 4:3-19, 25-26, 28-30
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Conversations at the Well: I'll Meet You There

"Where do you get that living water?" (John 4:11)

The other morning on my walk, my jaw dropped as I stood in the street outside a neighbor's house. In the distance was a view of Rocky Neck State Park. Moments before I was taking in the beauty of the still waters off Long Island Sound which were a reflecting pool of glass. But then, I saw it. The political flag hanging from a shingled garage and a wave of anger moved through me. I instantly became mean-spirited and judgmental. Had anyone been awake at this hour, I'm not sure what I'd have said...On the other hand, part of me wanted to engage them in a conversation but I didn't feel prepared.

As I continued on my walk, I tried to take an inventory of my sullen mood. What concerned me most of all was how quickly it changed from calm to rage in seconds. I'd judged this household harshly and condemned them to a stereotyped doom- all without even meeting a soul.

Many of us have grown more and more aware of the ruptures that continue to divide us up into little fiery camps; Us vs Them, Vacs vs Anti Vacs, the Religious Righteous vs the Know It All Progressives...

The painful reality is that our harsh political climate has crept into family relationships over time. Even my own. There are sociological, cultural, racial and historical reasons for this of course which I won't delve into today. I understand how we each bring a social context to the topic and a positionality that shapes our perspective.

Recently, I'd been further stunned to learn that in my extended family, someone that I haven't seen in years drove for 6 hours to DC to attend the January 6th rally. Yes. That January 6th. Apparently, this mother of two and nurse felt compelled to attend...and although she didn't get to the Capitol grounds, nonetheless, she responded to a call to action that she'd wanted to be a part of... Here's the thing, we couldn't be farther apart on this issue. But I do wish to understand and... I've thought about writing her a letter. Deep down, I wonder if I'm really open to what she has to say.

If I asked for a show of hands, I doubt there'd be many of us who remain untouched by the pain of fractured relationships— bonds made heavy by political and religious extremism. And, of course, the pandemic has only increased the fervor of our tribalism.

How do we change this? How might we manage the daily cycles of anger and onslaughts and yes, cruelty. I know there are no easy answers...but how about practices to help us to cope and grow and heal forward into hope?

Thankfully, as people of faith we have deep wells for this...with an abundance of spiritual, cultural, and artistic sources that can help us collectively and personally deal with the feelings and the ongoing challenges.

I'm curious, what are the wells you draw from?

The Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr, addressed this when he said, "Pain that is not transformed is transferred..." This is soul work; our very well-ness as a community, as a world depend on how well we can meet this moment.

Where are you finding strength for the long haul? We have to choose, Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "between community and chaos."

Our scripture today offers us some sustenance in this regard. In the gospel story from John, we find Jesus meets a woman from Samaria and he asks her for a drink. The well, as you know, is the communal meeting place in any ancient village, where neighbors talk, and get their daily needs for water met. On this day, it becomes a healing place of truth, revelation and restored humanity. We also learn through their conversation that this spot is the ancestral well of Jacob, the Patriarch from Genesis.

There are many unexpected turns in this drama and it's the longest conversation Jesus has with any character in the gospels. Back in the late 1st century when John's gospel was written, there were a lot of arguments over who did what the right way, etc. It was a time of hostility between Samaritans and the Jewish people so their conversation between a rabbi and a Samaritan widow is all the more unusual.

What we might notice as we read the story, is that the gender, ethnic and tribal differences fall away as the conversation deepens. There's a frank exchange of truths, open-ended questions, and some self-revealing on both Jesus' part and that of the woman he meets.

Whenever I read this familiar passage, I'm struck by how Jesus and the "other" from Samaria go deeper into the conversation and as they do, more comes to light. "Where do you get that living water?"

Jesus models another way. Just as the Samaritan shows courage in stating her truth and lets herself be known. There's a recognition of their shared humanity and a new relationship begins. It is a life-changing moment. And, at the end of the story, the community is called forth as the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar and goes to tell her village what she's experienced. "Come and see someone who has told me everything I've ever done."¹

I am always intrigued by that detail about the water jar. She left it there, perhaps representing the baggage she no longer needs to carry and the new journey she is on.... What might the jar represent in your life? What burden that you're carrying could you leave at the well?

¹ John 4:29

As we can see from this story, deep listening is a gift we give one another. But, how do we enter those uncomfortable conversations with those whose beliefs are antithetical to our own? Do we write them off? Are there some worth pursuing...as Jesus shows us.

The public theologian and world activist, Valerie Kaur, touches upon the power of listening in her memoir entitled, *See No Stranger*. Kaur is of the Sikh faith with Pakistani roots and she shares a compelling story of reckoning with her past wounds, and emerging as a prophetic voice after the traumatic events of 9/11 and Ferguson and into today...Recently, I heard her speak as the keynote at the UCC's General Synod this past July.

In her book, Kaur offers a framework she envisions as a "compass" and a language for understanding not only one's own torn heart but that of others with whom we may disagree. Rather than using the vocabulary of "enemy" Kaur uses "opponents" something I've started to do... "enemies" is such a loaded term and "opponents" has less rigidness, less moral weightiness...Kaur touches on the role of deep listening in drawing us closer to another's story. She writes, "listening does not grant the other side legitimacy. It grants them humanity--and preserves our own." Listening isn't about rushing to find sameness and smooth out the edges but ultimately, the "purpose of listening across lines of difference is not agreement or compromise. It is understanding." With understanding comes an opportunity for a different outcome.

Of course, much depends on the situation we find ourselves in as well as our own position of power, privilege and safety. We must discern for ourselves when it is our role to listen and even engage an "opponent's" story and point of view.

Last month the Dali Lama turned 86, another wisdom figure of mine from the well. I quietly celebrated his presence in the world by reading up on his life and teachings. As a world leader and Nobel Laureate, this exiled leader has spent nearly his whole life as the spiritual and former political leader of the Tibetan people. The Dali Lama has been living as a refugee in Dharamshala, India since he was 23. Famously, he's often quoted as saying, "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness".

Much of the Dali Lama's life was captured in a documentary called, *10 Questions for the Dali Lama* (2006), we follow the filmmaker, Rick Ray's journey to Dharamshala in India as he waits for the moment (for 3 months) when he can ask his questions. Ray's allotted only ten questions and a few minutes...and we learn that the Dali Lama has no patience for shallow questions so he'd better be on his game.

Once in the room, Ray's questions begin. Among them was a question about tense relations with China. He asked the Dali Lama, "What can be done about China and all the violence shown toward the Tibetans?"

The Dali Lama paused and said something I've never forgotten, "It's about mutuality", he said, "What's good for the Chinese is good for Tibet, what's good for Tibet is good for the Chinese. Everyone must understand this..."

Everyone must understand this... (can we understand the profound depths of this call for mutuality as we encounter the political divisiveness in our streets and in our families...?)

And when we do, when we can practice the mutuality of our shared humanity, when we can meet as opponents and embrace as friends. When we can listen deeply to what matters most to one another in the heat of the day and find some common understanding to lean on.

Well, then we will be on our way to becoming the beloved community in the world.

In the meantime, let's meet at the well, try to support one another and pass around the cup. I'll see you there!

Amen.

Note:

Phil Ochs, a folk singer and activist from the 60's wrote, "Even though you can't expect to defeat the absurdity of the world, you must make that attempt. That's morality, that's religion. That's art. That's life."