

Non-Violent Communication

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Exodus 3:1-6

Canticle 13

John 3:1-16

Several weeks ago I flew to Northern California for a meeting of 90 folks who are teaching mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist tradition here in the US, Canada, Mexico, and the UK. We are doing a two and a half year training program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, which is my spiritual home away from home. This was to be the second meeting of this group, the first having ended in fireworks around issues of diversity. In a word, lots of folks, for one reason or another, didn't feel like they belonged.

As the only priestly type, I was a sort of Christian mascot among the Buddhists, always warmly received, but something of a curiosity. I, too, wondered whether I belonged. Some folks at the first meeting, like me, did their not-belonging quietly, some did it verbally and explosively, and some did it by withdrawing into meditative silence. I was not looking forward to the second installment of this engagement. Before this group began to meet I had thought the Buddhists would be better behaved than the Christians. You know, acting with compassion, kindness, that sort of thing. Wrong. So much for the Buddhist bypass. I knew that the Buddhists had methods to help us metabolize our conflicts, but I had my doubts that we as a group would utilize those methods.

On the flight out to Oakland, I read a book that had been assigned to us, *Non-Violent Communication*, by Marshall Rosenberg. Rosenberg was a student of the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, and has made it his life's work to throw himself into the breach of just about every conflict you can imagine. Israeli/Palestinian, labor/management, student/administration, nurses/hospital administration, gang vs. gang, and family member vs. family member.

When I began Rosenberg's book, I was very skeptical that much of any process was going to be able to help this group, and as a know-it-all therapist, doubtful that there would be much new to me in the book. I was, again, wrong. As I read through his book, I found I was learning a lot, and becoming curious about how this material would work out with this group.

As the group reassembled, it was clear that there were a number of unhealed wounds from our previous meeting. One person described that first meeting as "pure torture." Into this setting walks Miki Kashton, our facilitator from Marshall Rosenberg's Center

for Non-Violent Communication. She had our attention from the very beginning when she said that she was interested in dissolving the dichotomy between compassion and full honesty. She believed we could learn to be honest with one another, and kind, neither withdrawing nor attacking. Even though we, like all human beings, at the drop of a hat form enemy images, especially when the person is what we see as other, or their behavior is undesirable to us. I want you to remember the word undesirable, because it links with our gospel for today.

The method:

1. Observation, not evaluation, to build a shared context. Convert judgments into observations. Try this as an experiment for a week.
2. Feelings: from met or unmet needs.
3. Needs: physical, autonomy, celebration, play, integrity, spiritual communion, interdependence. Control, power, blame, and vindication are not needs, but strategies to get needs met. They don't ever work because they don't take the needs of the other into account.
4. Request, not a demand.

The goal here is to take 100% responsibility for my own feelings and my actions, because it is not your behavior, but my need, that causes my feeling. At any moment when our needs are not met, we need to own our feelings, our needs, and make intelligent guesses as to the needs that are driving the feelings of the other, no matter how toxic their behavior.

Coming back from California, I was looking forward to finding ways to use this teaching. I was meeting with a couple this week, and once again, the wife was expressing her frustration at her husband's inability to set limits on his work. She can't understand why he can't simply say no to his clients. So I say to her, "Here's an old feeling of frustration. What need do you think is driving that feeling?" She stops and thinks. "I'm afraid for his health. It's my need to be safe and connected with him. I'm afraid of losing him." Her eyes are wet; she's more sad than mad now.

To him I say, "And with these clients, what's the feeling?" He says, "I'm afraid they'll leave me if I don't always accommodate them. And if I lose them, I'm afraid I can't meet my obligations." And the need driving these feelings? He's quietly crying, not knowing why. We sit with it together. He says, shaking his head, "I just want them to love me. I don't know why I'm crying though." I say, "Sounds like to me you just told the truth.... Tears show up with the truth. Just trying to be good so they'll love you."

Unspoken between us was a reference to his strategy of accommodating his parents so they'd love him. It was unlikely that his clients would ever meet this old need. His family and spiritual practice had never really been able to fill this hole. What he was looking for was the one who was looking. If he is to receive this love he is needing, it will need to come from the one place he isn't looking. The looker. Himself. And that will mean loving all the parts of himself that are undesirable, that he thinks don't belong. That's real spiritual practice.

So what's all this got to do with the gospel for today and us at St. Augustine's? This teaching about the mustard seed likely strikes our ears differently than it did those listening to Jesus. When Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard plant, his hearers would have expected to hear something more like the kingdom is like the cedars of Lebanon, huge, impressive trees, like the redwoods in this country. Instead, Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, a mustard plant. An alert hearer would have known that according to rabbinical law, a mustard plant was forbidden in a household garden because it was fast spreading and invasive. It was, in this view, unclean, undesirable. So "an unclean, undesirable image becomes the starting point for Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God in this parable." (Thomas Keating, *The Kingdom of God is Like ...*)

Jesus is saying that the Kingdom is very near, but it's in the very neighborhood we don't want to go: the undesirable. Undesirable needs, undesirable feelings, undesirable behaviors. Jesus' Kingdom is a kingdom of undesirables, a kingdom of nobodies, a kingdom of those who feel they don't belong. My Buddhist friends and I discovered that we had at least one thing in common for all our diversity: no one felt they really belonged. Everybody felt to some degree like an outsider. When we could name that not-belonging and own that no one else was doing it to us, things began to open up.

One of our facilitators was a physician whose medical practice is a clinic for the homeless in San Francisco. She knew a lot about how hard it is for human beings to feel safe. She had us sit in two concentric circles for a wordless meditation. We sat, knee to knee across from one another. She had us close eyes, and center ourselves with our breathing. Then she invited us to open our eyes and hold each other's gaze, and for the one on the inside circle to make this wish, which she said slowly aloud: "May you be safe. May you be protected. May you be free from suffering. May you be happy." We closed eyes, and the outside person wished the inside person the same. Again we closed eyes and let it all sink in, and then moved musical-chair style around the circle. After this meditation, there wasn't any more talk about not belonging.

All beings have needs to be safe. All of us have needs to belong. Needs to be treated fairly and with respect. When those needs aren't met, there is constriction, bondage, and behavior that may be more or less skillful. The Center for Contemplative Justice at St. Augustine's needs a foundation of skillful, compassionate practice with the undesirable, what we think doesn't belong, in ourselves, in others. We need methods, like non-violent communication, not just ideals.

At this table Jesus sets, everybody belongs. And every part of every body belongs. It's a lifetime of spiritual practice to know this, at ever deepening levels, and to extend your reach, so that nothing is left outside. Who or what do you think, like the mustard plant, doesn't belong? That's where the kingdom is arriving in your life.

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