

# Building Bridges

Exodus 34:29–35 and Luke 9: 28-43a

Nick Strobel at [Wesley UMC](#) on March 3, 2019

Let us begin with a word of prayer.

Loving God,

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

In today's scripture passages, Moses and Jesus have a glorious mountaintop experience of perfect clarity with God and then translate what that experience means to others living in the messy realities of life. When Pastor Anne asked me a few weeks ago to preach this Sunday, I knew I wanted to say something about building bridges between groups who oppose each other but I wasn't sure if the lectionary readings would work for that topic. At first glance it may seem that today's scripture readings do not speak about bridge building but take a look at the quote at the top of our bulletin from Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Desmond Tutu said, “We are all agents of transfiguration. Go forth and transform your personal relationships, your community, your world, so it becomes hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, to peace.” Our society today definitely needs transformation and that need has only grown as communication technology has splintered us apart. We are called by God to translate our experience of the divine love to others living in the messy, hurting realities of life in ways that bring joy, justice, freedom, and peace. This has to be done face-to-face, hand-in-hand and it takes *time* to create enough trust for people to risk telling the truth of what's going on in their heart.

Social media was supposed to bring people together and create a more connected world. For example, Facebook's mission statement in 2009 talked about giving “people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” It's current mission statement is similar “Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” Although I'm a regular Facebook user and I use it as a way to keep up with the goings on of my family and friends, I'm aware of the pitfall of the communication technology in working toward the common good. The real

pitfall of the social media that I've noticed the past several years is that it enables us to "gerrymander" our social interactions to the point that unfamiliar experiences and ideas are excluded from our lives.

When Pope Francis' "Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home" came out in June 2015, I read it to see what he said about the biblical foundation for taking care of creation. I found that he talked about a lot more than taking care of our environment. Each paragraph in the encyclical is numbered. In paragraph 47, he talks about how modern media can splinter us apart. When I got to the paragraph in my reading of the encyclical back in 2015, I thought "YES! This is what I've been thinking too!" Here is what he said in paragraph 47:

"[W]hen media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches. True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. **Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature.** Today's media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others **and the complexity of their personal experiences.** For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise." [my emphasis added]

"The complexity of their personal experiences" — each of us is mixed bag of honorable, selfish, loving, hating, joyful, and sad qualities and tendencies. It is easy to remember this in the people we call friends but it is hard to do that with those we don't spend time with and extremely hard to do that with those we do know but disagree with.

How do we go forth and transform our personal relationships, our community, our world, so it becomes hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, to peace? Well, for one thing, we have to consciously spend time away from our screens. Another thing we can do is to find opportunities to experience the shared humanity we have with those who aren't like us.

Every now and then I have time to listen to "Here & Now" on NPR during my lunch break. One story that particularly struck me as a great example of bridge building between opposing groups was an [interview with Paula Green and Gwen Johnson](#). Paula Green is a conflict resolution expert in Leverett, Massachusetts and Gwen Johnson is a resident of Whitesburg, Kentucky. Green's group, "[Hands Across the Hills](#)" wanted to figure out how to move forward as a divided country after the 2016 election. They ended up reaching across the political spectrum to the coal-country town of Whitesburg.

After two years of home visits, emails, Skype sessions, and cultural events in both Leverett and Whitesburg, the people in the exchange groups have a true understanding of each other and friendships have been made that they figure will last a lifetime. The Hands Across the Hills group spent six months preparing for the first meeting between the two groups with a lot of Skypes and phone calls and preparing all sorts of community events. Even with a rich agenda of music, dance, drama and art, they knew there was going to be fear between the two groups. Building bridges between groups of people takes TIME!

On what the two groups discovered through their trips, Green and Johnson had this to say:

Green: "The biggest puzzle I think for many progressives is: Why did people vote for this president? Were they voting against their own interests? Which we hear over and over again. And I learned that they were voting for their interests, because their interest was coal, and Trump promised to bring back coal when Hillary talked about shutting down the mines. So it became very clear to me that these folks were voting for a very important interest: their survival.

"What was astounding for us [was] we didn't know what was going to transpire between us, and although we don't agree politically, we've come to love and care about each other a great deal."

Johnson: "They are worried about climate change, just as we are. We're not blind to that, and we're not denying that, but basic human needs overshadow that when you have a mono-economy that's built on coal.

They don't live in that mono-economy that we live in. And so, when we heard what they had to say, it was easier to understand how the divides came about. ... So we were enlightened on a lot of points that we were rather blind to.”

Green: “I think what happened in the end was that we humanized each other, because the Kentuckian stereotypes of us as liberal elites who didn't care about them, these walls of stereotypes and prejudices came down, and what we felt for each other was a very shared humanity at the deepest level.”

A very shared humanity at the deepest level. Isn't that what we believe in the church when we say that we're all children of God? Bakersfield College is looking to bring Paula Green out to speak about building bridges between opposing groups as part of our celebration of Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birthday celebration this year. If she comes out, be sure to attend her talk!

Another example of intentional trust-building that enabled meaningful dialogue to occur is the process used by the Commission on a Way Forward that was formed after the 2016 General Conference to explore options to keep the unity of the United Methodist Church while struggling over the question of inclusion of LGBTQ persons. The Commission met nine times over 17 months and included a diverse collection of 32 people from four continents and from a variety of theological perspectives.

As one of the moderators of the Commission, Bishop David Yemba, noted, “the key part of the early work was to build trust and intentional community among a group of people who had good reasons not to trust each other.” The Commission wrote a covenant with each other that included covenantal practices essential to their work together (such as praying for each other, actively engaging in all meetings, treating each with respect, patience, honesty, and love, and maintaining confidentiality) as well as avoiding harmful behaviors (such as harmful, blaming speech, interrupting others, dividing into factions, and being distracted from the work at hand). I've highlighted parts of the covenant and I encourage you to look at their full covenant on the “Commission on a Way Forward: About Us” page as a model example of what is needed to build trust and humanizing relationships. Commission members worked together over the 17 months to find a way forward through prayer, worship, Bible study, dialogue, study and fellowship. It took TIME and intentionality to build their relationships.

Brian Adkins, a pastor at Open Door UMC in Richmond, CA was a member of the Commission. He spoke at Annual Conference last year about the friendship he had developed with Patricia Miller, a much more theologically conservative lay member of the Commission. Those of us who participated in the discussions after worship in January and early February about the various plans that were brought to the special General Conference watched a short video with Pat and Matt Berryman, a theologically progressive lay member of the Commission, talking about the process used by the Commission to humanize for each other, those from opposing views, so honest friendships could be developed. Pastor Adkins described his relationship with Pat Miller in the same way.

I asked him before General Conference if he would consider coming to Bakersfield College to speak about the process as part of the Gandhi 150th activities. At the time he was open to that but I'll wait a couple of weeks to ask again in order to provide some time and perspective for healing after what happened at the special General Conference, whose delegates had NOT gone through the trust-building and learning process. I think their minds were already made up before they came to General Conference, so we saw what happens when people only state their positions instead of learning about the interests that they hold.

In the first session of our after-worship discussions, we also viewed a short video with Gil Rendle, who talks about the distinction between positions that are taken and the interests that people hold. Positions are conclusions and are usually non-negotiable. Behind the positions are the reasons, the interests that lead us to our position. The first part of getting people to move from shouting their positions to dialoguing about their interests is to get them to see the difference between positions and interests.

Rendle relates the story of two people working separately on two different projects while seated at the same table in the library. One person opens the window next to the table and then a little later the other person closes the window. Those two people have claimed their respective positions. [You could say it's an open and shut case. :) ] After a little while later, the first person opens the window up half as far as the first time. What do you think happens? Most would say that the second person would close it a quarter of the way—a nice compromise. But a quarter open window is still an open window and the second person's position is that the window should be closed, so the person closes the window the whole way which makes the first person upset.

The librarian observing what has transpired, talks with the first person about why he wants the window open. He tells her that he's got a very important project due tomorrow and the warm stuffy room is making him so drowsy he can't stay awake to finish the project. He needs some fresh air. The librarian now knows about the interests of the first person.

The librarian then talks with the second person about why he wants the window closed. He tells her about the very important project he's working on that involves all these papers spread over the table. When the window is open, the breeze blows the papers around, so he loses time working on the project because he has to re-organize all the papers. Now the librarian knows the interests behind the second person's position. Knowing the interests provides opportunities to come up with other options: opening the window from the top, having the second person move to a table that is not next to the window, offering coffee to the first person, turning on the AC, etc.

Rendle concludes the video with, "It's when we get to the interests, and we begin to understand what's important to one another, that we enter into a much deeper conversation that allows us to find a way forward together. When we speak only in conclusions, when we speak only in our positions, we only know that we can't change each other. But when we begin to explore what's behind it, what's important to us, the Spirit moves."

The materials we used for the discussions were part of the Discipleship Ministries "Courageous Conversations" curriculum. "Pre-planning a Courageous Conversation with a design team and an introductory lesson just to build relationships might seem like a lot of additional work, but your efforts will be highly rewarded." Courageous Conversations "require planning so that participants are in postures of learning and are not combative." (quotes from the Courageous Conversation about the Way Forward webpage)

Discipleship Ministries developed the Courageous Conversations project for local churches (and other outside groups) to encourage the group and individuals to "stay at the table when the anxiety and emotional turmoil is painful."

But it requires intentionality and TIME. Our gospel lesson today calls us to do this. Right after his glorious encounter with God, Jesus is confronted with a demon-possessed child and heals him. Now, today, we might say the boy was having epileptic seizures or had some form of mental illness

or some other medical abnormality but the point is that Jesus showed that his mountaintop experience meant that he had to show love by healing.

After our own glorious mountaintop experience of perfect clarity with God, we are called to translate what that experience means to others living in the messy realities of life and “transform [our] personal relationships, [our] community, [our] world, so it becomes hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, to peace.” (Tutu).

Amen!