

August 2016

Dear Friends in the Journey,

Like many people living in the United States, I recently watched the Republican and Democratic conventions. While I have an affiliation with one of the parties, I wanted to take the time to hear from each party – on its own terms – about what was important to them, how they spoke about it, who spoke about it, etc. They were very different conventions in many respects, and I learned a lot by tuning in.

What struck me, and what is striking many people in this country, is how deep the divides seem to be these days. Whether it is between Republicans and Democrats, within any one particular party, among racial groups, among religious groups, etc., there seems to be great polarization. Furthermore, people seem to be very reactive and kind of on edge. If Facebook is any indicator of where things are at (and I realize that this may not be the best barometer!), I know quite a few people who have “unfriended” or “unfollowed” people (or had it done to them) because of posts, memes or what people said in response to something.

What concerns me is not so much that there are differences. It’s that we do not seem to be able to talk about them or tolerate people who have a different opinion/outlook/belief.<sup>1</sup> Nor do we seem very interested in taking the time to get to know someone with a different belief or ideology. This does not bode well for us in the long run.

In these reflections, we will spend a little more time thinking about differences and see what it might mean for us as people of faith.

I hope that your summer months are going well.

Blessings,

Mike Boucher

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## I. Fire-Starter Questions

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<sup>1</sup> I want to be clear here, there are forms of violence that can be done to people when they engage in conversations with others who do not acknowledge them as people. As I read on a FB page (Son of Baldwin), “We can disagree and still love each other, unless our disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” So I am not saying that everyone should be willing to engage with everyone else. What I am talking about, however, is our ability and openness to engage difference.

1. Have you had a conversation recently with someone who held a different view from you? How did it go?
2. What would be a topic that you would have a hard time engaging someone who held a different belief on? Why?

## **II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Luke 6:41-42** (from The Message – a slightly different translation)

*It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this I-know-better-than-you mentality again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your own part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.*

**Luke 7:36 and Luke 14:1-2**

*One of the Pharisees asked him over for a meal. He went to the Pharisee's house and sat down at the dinner table.*

*One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move.*

**Romans 12: 14 – 19**

*Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.*

*Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."*

## **III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. What's Jesus' counsel for us when we encounter something or someone that we're likely to demonize somehow? Why do you think he takes this position?
2. If we were to do this with someone, that is, being aware of our own attitude, what do you think it might change about the encounter?
3. What might it suggest about Jesus that – even in a few short chapter from Luke's gospel – we have it recorded that he ate with Pharisees with some regularity? What do you think it suggests about what was important to him? What does it suggest for his disciples?
4. What stands out to you from this passage from Romans? What is hardest for you out of these sayings?

## **IV. Commentary**

I often think about what Jesus would say (or at least my interpretation of what Jesus might say) if he were around today. What would he have said as he watched the conventions? What would he say to our political parties? What would he say to different racial groups? What would he say to polarized people?

Answers like, “Love one another,” – while true and profound – don’t always help me very much. It’s too broad for me and just doesn’t help me get through the difficult nature of what it means to love.

In many ways, I think of love as a skill set. I think loving comes naturally to us as children and is available throughout our lives. The skills of love, however, take work and application. One of those skills, I submit, is learning to be present, available and curious to that with which we disagree. I think that this is one of the most challenging skills to learn because it requires a few things from us.

First, we need to deal with our own defensiveness and our need to be right. Second, we need to find ways to stay open and curious and not settle into a ‘we know the Truth’ attitude. Third, we need to deal with the possibility that we, in fact, may only see things partially. There’s probably more that it requires, but even that is a tough list.

In our current discourses, I see people doing just the opposite of these. People seem incredibly reactive, defensive and need to be “right”. We seem more inclined to believe that the “other” is just off base and that somehow we have come to see the world clearly and that they have not. Finally, many people speak about other people being “stupid” or “misguided” just because they believe something that doesn’t agree with what we may think.

So let’s pause for a moment and returning to the scriptures (this can always be a dangerous thing to do for our way of life...)...What I think catches my attention the most is the number of times Jesus is hanging around with people that he’s not “supposed” to be hanging around with. In this case, it’s the Pharisees. Why would he be wasting his time with the Pharisees?!? Weren’t they plotting to trap him, discredit him and ultimately kill him? Why would he waste his time and breath on those people?

I honestly believe that Jesus was genuinely open and curious towards difference. He wanted to engage it. He ate together with people – at their houses – where he could get to know them better, ask questions, engage in dialogue. Interestingly enough, it seems that some of the Pharisees (clearly not all of them) wanted to do the same.

My friend, Tim McGowan, and I were talking about this topic recently. It got him thinking about U.S Representative Krysten Sinema (D-AZ) who was given a recent award for bi-partisan work in congress. Earlier this year, she was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> most bipartisan member of congress because she works so effectively with people who disagree with her. In a recent interview she said, “A couple years ago, we were at a restaurant, and a member saw me having dinner with some Republicans — it was a bipartisan dinner I organize every couple of months with some friends of mine from the other side of the aisle,” Sinema recalled. “And on the way to the

bathroom, she stopped me, and she said, ‘Why are you having dinner with those people?’ And I said, ‘Well, those are my friends.’”<sup>2</sup> Basically she says that she really tries hard to “listen and understand.” Sound like someone else we’ve been talking about?

Is this something that we do – try to regularly engage people who are different from us? And do we engage them in order to understand them more deeply or do we have some other agendas?

I would also direct you back to a wonderful homily that was given last year by Joy Collins from our community. She was speaking for Solidarity Sunday which celebrates the life and contributions of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Her homily focused, however, on some of her painstaking and lifelong work to honestly engage her sister – who had very different views on Joy’s sexual orientation and life – which led to wider conversation circles where groups of LGBTQ and more conservative people honestly tried to understand each other better. It was incredibly moving, and Joy remains a teacher and mentor for me in what this work means and requires from us. You can listen to her homily at <http://spirituschristi.org/media.php?pageID=70>

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul tells the community very explicitly: *Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath....Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up...Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody.*

Even if we just took one of those, for example, discover beauty in everyone, a lot about our everyday lives (and our arguments) might have to change. This could actually be a meditative practice for us to try to find beauty in someone that we disagree with. Naturally it puts the burden on us to do that work, and, as I mentioned, there are probably many cases where it’s not necessarily wise or suggested to do this. But as Paul says in Romans, “If you’ve got it in you...,” then maybe try to do it.

In order to do these things, we need to make a solid commitment to being open, curious and understanding. This is not a syrupy, sweet form of love. This requires something from us. And yet it seems to be what is needed most if we are going to be able to get through some of the most difficult problems that we face as individuals and communities.

## **V. Action Step**

One action I will take based on these reflections is....

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rollcall.com/news/home/kyrsten-sinema-unconventional-style-play-well-with-others#sthash.F0pr0tGu.dpuf>