

## BRIDGING THE GAP

This morning, I'd like to have a little chat with you about "Bridging the Gap."

So, what kind of Gap am I talking about? Honestly, there are many gaps that we may need to bridge, but we can only do one at a time. So, let's start with the most important one: the gap between who we are in our hearts and who we desire to be in God's sight. If we are honest with ourselves, there is a gap between the two. That gap is dynamic, in other words, the distance between who we are and who we believe God wants us to be at any given moment can range from barely a sliver of space to a yawning chasm; but, it exists in each of us.

In this morning's Scripture reading, so beautifully shared by Debra Jones, one of our Certified Lay Servants, Paul reminds us: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...what is good, acceptable, and perfect."(NRSV) Paul, of course, was addressing the church as a body not necessarily each individual, but all organized groups are made up of people, so the transformation of minds must occur at the individual level. Ultimately, each of us is responsible for our own actions or inaction.

We are living through a period that none of us could have imagined. When we welcomed 2020...whether at watch night services or somewhere else, we probably prayed for a year that would bring goodness into our lives. The usual peace on earth, love of family and friends, good or improved health, perhaps even financial prosperity no matter what we prayed for, it was most likely for something positive for the world, our country, ourselves and our loved ones. (If you didn't pray for something positive, that is probably one of your gaps!)

**NOTHING PREPARED US FOR A WORLDWIDE PANDEMIC OR ANY OF THE MASSIVE CHANGES IN OUR LIVES THAT HAVE RESULTED.**

When our lives were disrupted by the pandemic, many of us were unequipped to deal with a long-term disruption. Many of us naively thought that the changes were only short-term. A few weeks or a couple of months, at most. Yet here we are five months into the COVID-19 crisis, and there is still no satisfactory resolution. In many places people are trying to return to the “good old days and the good old ways, with a broad range of outcomes...many not so good. We may need to grapple with the likelihood that recovery from this period may result in a new “normal” that we have yet to completely envision.

Meanwhile, the protests and the renewed push for equality and justice in our country have initiated a lot of soul searching and dialogue as to what should be done, what can be done, and what will be done in response to this most recent “reawakening” of the demands for equality. Our churches and other institutions have committed to have discussions on being anti-racist. Reconciliation efforts and promises of change or focused efforts to bring about needed changes are taking place throughout many parts of our country.

Hats off to those who joined in peaceful protests. But even with the widespread movement in the streets of cities around the world and the signs of hope and promise, many of these efforts have fallen on people with hardened hearts, closed minds, or deep fear of meaningful changes and fears about how such changes would affect *them*. Sadly, too many of our Christian brothers and sisters are among that number. Maybe even some of us are among those brothers and sisters. We simply want to “go along to get along.” Some of us have even joined the chorus of naysayers who blame everything and everybody for the ills of the world but fail to remove the log from our own eyes.

We know how we act (or fail to act). We know our reasons or our excuses. We also know what our Christian faith requires of us. Is there a gap between what we do and what we need to do? Is there a gap between what we say that we believe and how we live our faith? As Christians, we are expected to embrace our faith as a lived faith. We must constantly pray for guidance to help us bridge the gap between how we are and who we need to be in God’s sight.

I must preface this next remark with a disclaimer. This is not a political statement. But it is just an acknowledgement that the divisiveness, discord, and hatred that seem to dominate the broadcasts, the internet, social media, and print media these days have effectively separated us into warring tribes. This is not only along political party lines, but also along social, economic, racial, ethnic, citizenship and religious lines.

We claim to see people as people, BUT our attitudes towards them (and vice versa) are deeply influenced and constricted by our differences. Friendships and family relationships have not been spared the conflict and disunity resulting from differences in opinion and belief. Even the church has not been spared!

If we, as Christians, believe that we are all “Children of God” why can’t we act like it? Jesus reminds us to love our neighbor, to love our enemy, to love ourselves, but most of all, to Love God. How can we really love God when we harbor feelings of disrespect, disdain and even hatred for those with whom we disagree? How wide is that gap in your life? Do you conform to the ways and practices of this world? How can we narrow that gap? What can we do to transform our thinking so that it is consistently reflected in our actions?

In our Bible Study class, a topic that often comes up is the challenge of discerning the will of God. How do we know, really know, that what we think we have discerned is what is God’s will, and not a reflection of our own biases and motives? We have all seen reports of those who have done great harm, all in the name of God, because they claimed that it was God’s will. We know that there is evil in this world, but we don’t always recognize when we are the promoters or even carriers of evil. Some of you may be bristling that I would even suggest that we may be bearers of evil, but hear me out. When we gossip, when we attempt to tear others down, when we lie about significant things or maliciously lie about the actions of others, we are bearers of evil.

In this period of social media, we are even more at risk of spreading falsehoods that may damage others. A part of our Christian responsibility these days is to make sure that we don’t perpetuate misinformation, lies and conspiracy theories. We have a

responsibility to check the veracity of some of the things that we see posted, especially if they are potentially inflammatory!

There should be no gap between what we are willing to accept in our hearts and what we hope would be pleasing in God's sight. We must not get caught up in the moment because of our passionate approval or disapproval of a particular viewpoint. We must pause and hand it to God so that we won't be prompted to fall by the wayside, so to speak. With the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that we are constantly exposed to these days, we need to work on becoming a *firewall for our faith* to slow down the spread of hate. We must not conform to the ways of the world! If we are indeed "soldiers of the cross, we need to hold the banners of truth and love high in our hearts and serve as examples of how Christians who are committed to the Word and not the world should behave.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that many of us are suffering. We are struggling to adjust and to keep moving forward at a time that everything seems to be topsy-turvy. We want desperately to hold on to something that seems like the old normal. We want God to reassure us that everything is going to be OK, but what *is* OK?

When we are hurting, *how* are we to focus on being good, being kind, being loving or closing any gap between our reality and our need to be what God wants us to be? When we are hurting, no matter what the reason, we just feel emotionally drained. We pray, we may scream, we may cry, we pray, we may lash out at those around us, we pray, and sometimes we get *really* angry. We may get angry or at least harbor resentment against those whom we perceive to be untouched by and insensitive to what is going on. But our resentment isn't limited to the few whose lives don't seem to be touched by anything (them), and who even seem to be thriving, perhaps at the expense of the many (us). OOPS! You see how easy it is to fall into that them-us dichotomy: For the record, "they" are also God's Children. We must work hard on replacing resentment and anger at the seeming "unfairness" of what is happening now. We must replace it with prayerful determination to be true to our commitment to work toward renewing our minds, our hearts, our spirits so we can walk humbly with our God.

If we are truthful, we don't always limit our anger to other people, sometimes we may get frustrated and even angry with God because we can't understand "why me? or why us?" Now before you close down your ZOOM link, hear me out. Anger with God is not new. We only need to read some of the Psalms, or other Old Testament scriptures. Anger is human, anger is real, anger is an emotion that we need to work through to see that, despite our childish tantrums, God is steady. He doesn't desert us, even when we wonder if he has. Instead of falling into the current attitude of "it is what it is," I think instead we should proclaim that "God is what he is: Steady, ever-present and everlasting."

When living our faith, we do, in fact, present our bodies as a living sacrifice, we try to be holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship. It is through our actions of love, compassion, kindness, understanding, forgiveness, and generosity that we model a Christian life to others. We need not pretend that we are flawless. We don't need to try and "fake it." We must embrace our humanness as an essential part of our lived faith. That humanness encompasses the good the bad and the ugly in each of our souls.

Paul reminds us not to think of ourselves more highly than we should, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. That is why we must constantly refresh and renew our spirit through our study of the Word, and through our focus on loving God and most importantly, not attempting to be God. If that seems harsh, remember that one of the gaps that we may experience occurs when we judge others with a spirit of contempt and derision. Again, it gets us back to that log in our eyes!

In closing, I urge each of us (yep, I'm included) to work on closing the gaps in our lives between who we know ourselves to be in our hearts, and what we need to be to be acceptable in God's sight. Each of us is at a different point in our spiritual journey. God meets us where we are. No matter where that is...at the beginning or near the end, or any point along the way, let's open ourselves, and be transformed by the knowledge that the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. (Philippians 4:7) God will guide us and help us to bridge the gap.

*Paulette Brinkley Wright  
Silver Spring, MD*

*Colesville United Methodist Church  
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