

## Planting Forests

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As often happens, I looked at the Revised Common Lectionary readings for this week and thought, *How am I going to come up with a message based on this scripture? What message can I share that will be coherent, honest, and help people understand these verses?* Then I read them again, and again, and again ... until something began to gel. I find the New Testament passages easier to understand, and the words are far more likely to resonate with me. So today we will be looking primarily at Paul's words in Second Corinthians 8:7–15:

Be the best in this work of grace in the same way that you are the best in everything, such as faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you. I'm not giving an order, but by mentioning the commitment of others, I'm trying to prove the authenticity of your love also. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.

I'm giving you my opinion about this. It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. As it is written, "The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little." (CEB)

My direction for this message today really came together when I learned it was Open and Affirming Sunday. I focused on Paul's words and advice to the Corinthians. Paul talks about the imperative of generosity. Paul advises that people give as they are able, not so they hurt themselves, but so there is a fair balance "between what you have and what they need." Good advice, because it does not make sense to impoverish ourselves so that others can have an abundance. Think about this as you prayerfully think about your giving to Centre Street Church. (Sorry, I had to get that plug in because I'm on the Board of Trustees.) But I think there is another, deeper meaning to Paul's words, and on this Open and Affirming Sunday, it is worth taking this deeper dive.

What intrigued me were his words prior to this advice on how to give. He said, “It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something, but even to desire to do something. Now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.”

Then I began to think about our wonderful Open and Affirming Statement, and I wonder if we may have missed something. Did we begin something, but not finish it? Do we have the means to finish it? I’m sure we do.

Everyone is welcome at Centre Street Church. We have declared ourselves to be open and affirming of all people. It is easy to be welcoming to all people, but is it easy to stand up for those people when we hear others disparaging them? Is it easy to take a public stand and speak out against the injustices we see all around us?

It’s not for me. I don’t like confrontation or conflict, and I don’t know many of us who do. I know I have heard someone tell a racist joke, or heard someone call another person a faggot, and I have said nothing. I have walked away and not finished my job. I’m guessing that I am not alone in avoiding conflict. It is much easier to walk away and distance ourselves from the person who made the comment. That is the path of least resistance that most of us are most likely to take, but at what cost? We may cut off communication between our friends and family. What if we learned to communicate better so we can speak up in defense of marginalized people? What if we finished our job—not just welcoming, but affirming every chance we get?

Several Blueberry Festivals ago, a vendor who arrived late ended up setting up in the lower portion of the church commons. I didn’t make my way down there to see him because I was too busy. After a few hours, a guest sought me out to complain that the vendor was displaying and selling Confederate flag merchandise. According to the Anti-Defamation League,

Organizations such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans adopted the flag as a symbol of Southern heritage but the flag has also served as a potent symbol of slavery and white supremacy, which has caused it to be very popular among white supremacists in the 20th and 21st centuries. This popularity extends to white supremacists beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

I was shocked that this was at our beloved Blueberry Festival. I knew I had to do something, but I was scared and incredibly uncomfortable. I said a little prayer as I walked down to the lower end of the commons. I easily found the vendor in his big green trailer festooned with

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<sup>1</sup> *Anti-Defamation League*, Glossary of Extremism and Hate, "Confederate Flag."  
<https://extremismterms.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/confederate-flag>

Confederate flags, where a husband and wife were working in the booth. I asked to speak to the owner, keeping my shaking hands clenched at my sides.

As the man approached me, he looked nice enough, so I thought maybe I could relax. I took a deep breath and said, "This is a family festival produced by a church, and we really cannot allow you to sell your Confederate flags and other merchandise that has the flag on it."

Clearly dumbfounded, he asked why. I explained that "we" saw the flag as a symbol of a difficult and unjust time in our country's history. (I was definitely using the church to back me up on this; it wasn't just me standing alone.)

He said, "No one has ever prevented me from selling these things."

"Well, I'm doing so now." I replied, "Otherwise I will have to ask you to leave."

He grumbled and growled a bit, but he put away that merchandise and stayed through the end of the festival. (I did wander down there periodically to make sure he was adhering to the rules.)

Three or four years later, I received a call at church from a man who wanted vendor space. I can't remember what he said that tipped me off to the fact that he was the Confederate flag guy. But when I asked if he had been here before and sold from a large green trailer, he said yes.

"Oh, you're the gentleman who was selling Confederate flags," I said.

"Yes, I am," he replied. "You know, I looked up what you had told me when I got home, and you were right. There was much more to the meaning of that flag than I knew about. I get it now."

My communicating in a respectful but assertive way had helped him think about what he was doing and educate himself about what his products were signaling to other people. When this man took the time to research what the Confederate flag meant to many people, he recognized the role it continues to play in subjugating Black Americans—even today, 155 years after slavery ended.

This is not to say that every interaction will result in someone seeing the error of their ways, but I do believe that as Christians, we have a duty to speak up when we should. In other words, we need to finish the job. By not speaking up, we are complicit. In "Professional Ethics and Complicity in Wrongdoing," Gregory Mellema says, "The taxonomy of Thomas Aquinas consists of nine ways a person can be complicit in wrongdoing: by command, by counsel, by consent, by flattery, by receiving, by participation, by silence, by not preventing, and by not

denouncing."<sup>2</sup> It's these last three—silence, not preventing, and not denouncing—that I am talking about. Mellema believes that Aquinas' work, though written in the thirteenth century, provides insights we can use today.

How do we find ways to engage with our fellow humans who think differently than we do? We need to stop walking away and shaking our heads. We need to try to understand where the other person is coming from. I think many of us really have difficulty listening; I know I do. I find myself thinking as the person is talking, preparing my response. That is not listening with our hearts, but with our egos. I have recently discovered the book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall B. Rosenberg,<sup>3</sup> who explores ways of communicating that lead us to give from the heart. I highly recommend this book to everyone who wants to find better ways to respond in our polarized world, our communities, our work, and our homes.

I think our interactions with others will become less fraught and stressful if we really do try to listen. For some reason, when I am working, I am really good at listening, but when I am with family and friends, not so much. I wonder why I have so much difficulty putting on my listening ears when I am with people I am closest to? Maybe I feel the need to prepare my response, while they are still talking, because I want to show them how knowledgeable I am. Maybe it's because I'm afraid I will forget what insightful thing I thought of as they were speaking. Today, in front of you and God, I am making a pledge to learn how to listen to everyone with whom I have an interaction—that I will listen with my heart, not my ego-driven brain. I know I won't always get it right, but I will try.

So back to our scripture lesson. I contend that by learning to listen with our hearts, and learning to speak carefully and kindly, we can stop being complicit. We can practice how to respond to folks who say something unkind and hurtful. We could even have prepared comments that we keep tucked in our brains, for just the right opportunity to use. I think one of the best ways to manage these difficult situations is to say something like, "I'm not sure you understand how hurtful your words could be to...."

Now, this could turn into an unpleasant and contentious conversation, or the person might be surprised by your heartfelt response and ask for more information. If not, it is okay to walk away. You will have planted a seed, just as I did with the Confederate flag guy. Seeds grow. If all of us do this, just imagine the forest we could build. It may take time, because trees take a long time to grow, but they are worth the wait.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Mellema, "Professional Ethics and Complicity in Wrongdoing," *Journal of Markets & Morality*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 93, 94. <https://www.marketsandmorality.com/index.php/mandm/article/viewFile/211/203>

<sup>3</sup> Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2015.

I wonder if adding a line to our Open and Affirming statement might help us be more mindful of the need to speak up when we are confronted with injustice and discrimination. What if our Open and Affirming statement said:

We, the congregation of Centre Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, declare ourselves to be open and affirming of all people. With God's grace, we seek to be a congregation that embraces differences of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, age, mental and physical abilities, and racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status. ***We seek to affirm everyone, by speaking out against injustice when we hear it or see it.*** We welcome all to share in the life and leadership, ministry, fellowship, sacraments, responsibilities, and blessings of participation in our faith community.

Let us all think of how we can begin a movement of listening with our hearts, responding with our hearts, and stopping ourselves from being complicit by allowing people to say hurtful and unkind words. As Paul says, "It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something, but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means." Our means are all different, and we can only give what we can give, but let's see if we can start planting some seeds that may promote justice and equality for everyone. Let's begin to finish our job. Amen.