

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Independence Day - July 4, 2004
Summer Forum – Presentation and Discussion
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Turtle on a Fencepost: How We Got Here

If you see a turtle on a fencepost, what do you think? What do you know?

A flood receded leaving it stranded...

Someone put it there...

What questions do you ask?

Can a turtle climb?

Are there other signs of flooding in the area?

Would there be a reason for someone to put it there?

Does it need to be left there?

If not, how will it get down?

If you see a turtle on a fencepost, what do you do?

Do you walk on by?

Do you take note? Explore? Address the situation?

If your young child struggles with homework, does not retain information that is transmitted verbally, does not get the logic of simple mathematics, and the teacher sends a note home – pinned to her sweater – announcing that the child is mentally retarded – what do you think?

What questions would you ask?

Is my child ADHD? Dyslexic?

Does she need to be in a “Special Class” for slow learners?

Would Sylvan Learning Center be a good choice?

Is she a visual or kinetic learner and need different forms of teaching?

What are the teacher’s credentials and methods used for diagnosis?

Would a second opinion be called for?

Would you ignore the note and see what happens?

My parents, knowing their daughter was just fine, decided to ignore the note, take the child off the fencepost and put her back on the ground. My sister went on to earn a Bachelor’s Degree in Anthropology and a Teaching Credential in Special Education.

A person has a habit of relating to people fairly intimately and fairly quickly. They also have a habit of cutting people off fairly quickly and going cold and distant – perhaps even leaving that relationship or community altogether – with no explanations.

What do you know about this person?

This person has some issues....

Caution might be called for in relating to this person.

What questions could you ask?

Does this person have trouble setting boundaries? Knowing how close is too close, how far is too far?

Is this person afraid of something? Getting hurt? Getting found out?

Has this person been conditioned to keep secrets?

Do they have limited skills for communicating important feelings or information? Factors: age, conditioning, experience, capacity

Do you walk on by? Or do you explore? Address the situation?

A worshipping congregation has a series of short term ministers – each 1-3 years. The church has a reputation as a clergy abusing church. Their bylaws are very long and complicated and have plans of action for every possible contingency.

What do you know about this church?

There is anxiety present.

Something happened to cause that anxiety.

What questions can you ask?

When did these behaviors begin?

Was there a traumatic event involving a minister? (misconduct?)

Are anxiety and mistrust affecting every new relationship with a minister?

Is this a conscious or unconscious dynamic?

What can be done to change the situation?

Every person carries stories around inside of them. Every group of people has stories that they carry in the behavior and dynamics of their family or community. And most of these stories are fascinating – and unique – and more common than we know because the full stories are rarely told out loud.

This church – and its two predecessor churches that merged to form this one – have histories of fairly long pastorates. There have been conflicts, but most of those have been dealt with openly and with intentional dialogue. The turtles were not left on the fenceposts – at least, not for long.

But if I say the word “sexist” some folks will immediately think I am talking about a particular past minister. If I say “brilliant, powerful preacher” another past minister comes to mind – for some. If I say “alcoholic” and “in the closet” – the same person or others will come to mind – depending on who is hearing the words and what their experience has been.

All of those people live on in the psyches of any number of individuals here – AND in the dynamics of this church. There are other ministers and priests, rabbis and congregants, who have never set foot in this church – but who also affect the dynamics here. Among other things, this UCC has served as a refuge for people who have been traumatized elsewhere – some by judgmental doctrines, some by control freaks, some by sexual misconduct or pedophilia, some by an atmosphere of secrecy and fear.

And all of those experiences travel with us – from building to building – from place to place – until we address the issues of the past and put the turtle back down on the ground. When someone says something unusual or reacts strongly to an idea or remains focused on a particular problem or person in their life – there are some questions one could ask. There may be ways to address the anxiety or past hurt. By doing so, that person may be changed and the entire dynamic of the community may be changed.

It means being attentive to the stories and behaviors of others. It means looking beneath the surface of things, listening to the history behind the present moment. It means not closing our

eyes and walking quickly past and out of sight. It means being willing to struggle a bit, feel some pain, take some responsibility for each other. It means learning to collaborate on solutions to problems.

We don't have to share the same theology or political ideology to be a friend and collaborator, healer and inspiration for hope. We just have to be willing to be open, willing to share and be shared with, willing to look beneath the surface of things – in ourselves and others – with an attitude of compassion.

If you are willing – and you don't have to be – this is a choice...

If you are willing – please turn to someone near you – not necessarily a family member (but that's okay too).

- Would you take turns sharing with the other person an occasion in a church – any church – during worship or in the wider life of the church – an occasion when you felt hurt or betrayed or judged.
- Will you now share what you or someone else did – if anything to address that hurt?
- If the pain has NOT been addressed, take some time to think together about how it MIGHT be addressed now.

If you are willing, would one or both of you find another person in the room.

- Will you take turns sharing an occasion in any church when you felt deep joy or release or awe? A time when you felt most at home or at peace?
- What were the components of that experience? Are there parts of that experience that can be built upon or shared with others?

If you are willing, would one or both of you find another person in the room.

- Would each of you think for a moment about a person in your life who recently or currently causes you grief/pain/anxiety.
- Describe what it is about that person that causes you this reaction and where that behavior or quality might have come from IN THAT PERSON'S life/self.
- Explore together where the reaction in YOU comes from and what you might do to find NEW ways to react or respond.

If you are willing, one last time, would one or both of you find another person in the room.

- Would each of you tell the other the story of how this church building that we are in came into being and how you came to be inside of it this morning. (Refrain from correcting or changing the other person's story – just tell your own.)
- Share with each other what you learned from the other.

Let's come together as a whole group again.

If you are willing, please share what you learned from each other this morning about the hand or the flood that brought you to this fencepost – this place and this moment.

Welcome to the Summer Forum and Worship

“Interim Interludes”

During the summer, we continue our faith journey together by opening the pulpit to lay scholars and guides to address the possibilities of “Walking the Talk: Living Our Core Values.” Although this is a departure from the “normal” sermon and service, it provides our spirits with insight and reflection for our walk together in faith rather than doctrine.

Hymn Sing

Announcements

+ **Call to Worship** (responsive)

Hymnal #824

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements - Prayer Requests

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Presentation and Discussion

“Turtle on a Fencepost: How We Got Here”

+ **Commissioning** (unison)

Hymnal #877