Sermon: Not My Problem
01/10/16

Who would have thought one little drop of honey could cause so much trouble! Our story’s Queen learned otherwise, right? She learned that sometimes leaving something unattended, for long enough, could create mischief, fighting and even fire! I can remember my mom yelling at me as a kid to clean up my bedroom, or pick up my toys from the living room floor, or to turn off the television when I was done. I think I now have a better idea of what my mom was worried might have happened – although the biggest risks were probably just broken legos and lost toys – either one though would certainly threaten a crying little Jude.

Cleaning up after ourselves, putting away our toys, doing the dishes now before the friendly neighborhood cockroaches and rats arrive to do our work for us, are all good habits to have and the reasons are mostly clear. But what can this story mean when we’re not talking about honey, or food, or dishes, or legos? What can it mean when it’s referring to the everyday mistakes we make? The nasty emails we clicked the send button for; the failing school grade that we hid the report card for; the impatient remark we make to a fellow congregant – to a friend; or the promise we fail to uphold? Can these things spiral into something more; with the proverbial cat and dog fighting amidst the baker and the butcher?

I’d guess that we can all imagine ways in which these things can easily get out of control if we let them sit there and work their mischief. Emails can cause hurt feelings, that only grow when we confirm them, by ignoring the hurt in our own writing. The same can be said for bitter attitudes with folks around us in person. Hiding our school troubles only delays when the truth comes out, and in return we only cut ourselves off from the support of our family when we probably need it the most.

The answers are often simple even if they feel hard to do at the time. Face what we fear in the moment rather than letting it grow out of control. The more we avoid it, the more we fear it, the more troublesome or hurtful it can become. The more power we give it to define our lives.

What if the everyday negative things that happen are part of a bigger problem that goes beyond us? We’re rapidly coming upon Martin Luther King day, and February is Black History month, and I’ve been wondering how an attitude of “not my problem” has contributed to so many of the difficult stories Black Americans have had to face. I wonder how our unwillingness to face our fears of the moment help to support discrimination, prejudice and injustice even though we might not agree with the attitudes that create unfairness between people from different backgrounds.

One congregant from a former church that I served told me an interesting story from 25 years ago. She was a kindergarten teacher in the Sunday school, but she was retired when she told me this story.
She said, “At one of the offices where I worked, I was friends with the bookkeeper who was a black woman. At lunch, we’d sometimes run across the street to the Korean deli to grab something to eat at our desks. After doing this a number of times, I noticed that although the man at the cash register would always put my change into my hand, he always put my friend’s money on the counter. I didn’t notice the first few times, but eventually I did and discussed it with her. She said it was one of the things that happens when you shop while black.

I suggested that we not go back even though it was the most convenient and cheapest place nearby. She didn’t want to give up the convenience and said it happened in lots of places and if she let it get her too crazy, life would be even harder than it was. I had known there was prejudice but had not really understood how even the smallest things like how you receive your change was a way of people keeping others ‘in their place’.

Take a moment and imagine what it would feel like if folks went out of their way to avoid you in everyday interactions? How would it feel if people treated you differently than other people? Have you ever felt this way before?

Our first principle, where we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, reminds us that treating people negatively because of who they are, or whom they love, is a moment where we fall short of who we could be. We’re not at our best when we diminish, when we put down or insult others. And our Unitarian Universalist faith asks more of us than that.

How easy would it have been just to ignore the little fact that the cashier gave change to some people in their hands, and to other people they put the money on the counter? Paying attention to how folks interact is a really important skill. Speaking up, or reaching out – depending on the situation – makes a huge difference too. Taking the time to talk about what happens matters too. It can show we care. It can show we know something’s not right. It’s the beginning of solidarity. These are all ways in which we can live out our first principle too. We often talk about how we affirm the worth and dignity of every person, but our principle also calls us to promote their (and our) worth and dignity. It’s important and great to recognize the value of the people around us; and it’s just as important to protect that sense of appreciation for the people around us. Our principles are not beliefs so much as action statements.

Some of us may be thinking that none of this is really new. That we all know that racism and prejudice and discrimination are bad. And yet it still continues, so I feel we need to regularly have a reminder. I’m not convinced that we always speak up, nor am I convinced that everyone in our religious and social circles are always enlightened on this matter. I get a glimpse of it from time to time because I frequently get confused with someone who is of a Jewish background. I’m actually of a mixed background, each grandparent coming from a different European country. I have a lot of immigrants in my family tree. I was raised Italian Catholic, and for those of you who also were, you know exactly what I mean when I say Italian Catholic. It’s a cultural identity that means a lot to me with all its humor and strength. And I’m not Jewish, but I’m told I look it.

I mentioned that I get a glimpse of discrimination from time to time. I can most easily tell when someone’s mistaking me for Jewish when the person becomes oddly mean, or dismissive, or patronizing (a big word for talking down to me.) Sometimes they’ll make an explicit reference to me being Jewish. I’ve honestly not experienced this at our
congregation, or any congregation that I’ve served at, but I have run into it at other UU congregations that have fewer Jewish congregants, and I do encounter it from time to time in stores in NYC. When other folks are present, no one ever says anything. No one ever speaks up. I try to focus more on changing their habits, or calling them out on it, than I try to change their assumption that I’m Jewish. It’s an opportunity not to avoid their discrimination, but rather to correct it.

I even saw this start to happen at airports about 4 years ago; right around the time I decided to grow in my beard. All of a sudden, I began getting stopped and randomly inspected at airports. I couldn’t figure out what was going on until one of my middle-eastern friends pointed out that with the beard I looked like some of their cousins. I may not be able to change anything about how this happens, but by paying attention, I can deepen my empathy for my neighbor, and maybe change views of others down the road.

One interesting thing I’ve come to learn about our first principle is that it doesn’t try to say we’re all the same; it reminds us that we all have value – that where we come from matters and is worthy. It is correct to say that we’re all human, but I think it’s a mistake to hide or cover up our differences. Just like I strongly value my Italian cultural household (yep, mom won out on that front), our First principle suggests we value the different backgrounds we all come from. We shouldn’t discriminate because of how someone looks, or where they come from, but we should learn from the identity and culture our neighbors grew out of. Ignoring the strengths that come from our differences is another way of the Queen ignoring the honey she dropped. Without stretching the metaphor too far, something is lost when we let that nourishment go to waste as well.

All these things that might seem to some people as small things (the change on the counter or the hand, the disparaging comment, ignoring who someone is,) can really add up to bigger problems. All these stories when looked at broadly paint a picture of a world where folks are treated unfairly based on characteristics we choose to dislike for no good reason. I believe that these drops of “messy honey” from the “unconcerned Queen” from our story, can add up to fighting and a burning kingdom. It’s up to each of us to clean it up in the moment; to not let a bad thing spread.