

Our Neighbors Are Not Our Enemies

Elio Farley, March 3rd 2024

Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society

When first dreaming this message, I told Liam I wanted it to be about faith and organizing, protest as an act of prayer. But then the pain of the world opened like a crevice these past 5 months, and in attempting to navigate that violence, a phrase planted in my brain (and I can't seem to get rid of it).

Our neighbor is not our enemy. What if we refuse to simplify another being into the false dichotomy of us vs them?

Let me tell you a story...

The holiest moment I ever experienced refused this false dichotomy. On the final night of Hanukkah, I was at a multifaith, multigenerational menorah lighting. Under the guidance of my Jewish neighbor, my Muslim neighbor lit the menorah. We sang the blessings, and Hebrew anti-war songs. As I gazed out of my keffiyah I wore like a Catholic prayer veil, I realized how deeply I underestimated my community. Many of the people around me held deep fear for their loved ones in Palestine and Israel and held diasporic and religious pains I do not know. Propelled by this fear and pain, and somehow greater than it, was a refusal to be complicit in U.S.-funded genocide. I thought this refusal just had to be based in a deep, politically consuming love.

I understand that as love of my neighbor. I am really curious, what can happen if we expand our understanding of neighbors beyond geographic boundaries? Would we hold as much responsibility for the well-being of the children we will never meet as we do the preschoolers we see in snowsuits every morning? Could we care for people outside our segregated American neighborhoods? Could Middlebury's not in my backyard culture end?

These are gigantic questions. I believe in our capacity for compassion enough to try to answer them.

I have more questions though, if you will join me.

... How do we want to love each other? Philosophically, practically, ... How do we want to love each other?

Will we materially support people different from ourselves, not in an act of saviorism, but through a politic of solidarity and neighborliness? Will we offer childcare so a parent can take an extra shift? Will we demand a living minimum wage out of our legislators? Will we keep our eyes out for ICE checkpoints and warn our neighbors? Will we boycott Hannaford dairy until they sign on to Leche Con Dignidad, Milk With Dignity, because our neighbors deserve decent

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labor conditions? Will we learn the languages of our neighbors? Refuse the sentiment that English is the language of this land when we know it's the colonizer's tongue?

If you've answered yes to any, I hope we can act in accordance. Ideals are great, but we need action too. Now I'm going to ask us some questions I'm nervous asking even myself. And we're going to be uncomfortable together, because that's where growth happens.

Will we jump the car of the neighbor with the obnoxious lawn signs? If we don't care for their politics, do we at least care that they can get to work on time? Will we take the time to actually talk to them, and be curious enough to learn why they hold those beliefs? Will we actually listen to what they say and not just listen to respond or argue? If we don't want to talk to them about politics, will we ask them about their loved ones or at least the weather? Will we deliver them soup when we learn they've lost someone they love? Can we earn their trust enough to care for them? To allow that relationship to be reciprocal? To invite them over for coffee? To dare to call them a friend?

Believe me, I know what it's like to love someone whose politics disagree with my very existence. Who was taught that I am a threat to their values. I live that pain. I witness it in my own family. And, I refuse to let pain be my guiding force in this world.

How can we be neighbors with the people we disagree with, honor our disagreements and the pain that tension causes, and refuse to simplify our humanity into yet another case of them and us? Can we see the counterprotestor with the sign that makes our skin crawl as our neighbor?

These are not questions of passiveness, or agree-to-disagree. I also honor that depending on your neighbor's views and your positionalities, engaging can turn from uncomfortable to unsafe. You must trust your judgment, and the rest of us must respect your call.

I've asked us these questions because I am still figuring out the answers. Chances are, I'll have white hair and still not know the answers. I'm really just trying my best here. I do not believe that caring for someone I'm supposed to disagree with weakens my personal politics. Oftentimes, we can agree on some things. We can even coalition together.

But what about when we can't? When disagreement moves to hate? When a white christian nationalist comes to a pride event, I'm not enthused to talk to that guy. But I do, or someone else on the safety team does. We keep us safe. Engagement is absolutely safer for some than for others. Part of checking in is a vibe check, making sure he's not acting dangerously. Sometimes he wants to hurt people, sometimes he wants to be listened to. And part of talking to him, at least for me, is a gigantic curiosity. I want to know what verses he references. If he hates gay people

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so much, why did he go out of his way to be surrounded by them? I want to know how we can both believe in some form of a greater power. But, his belief allows him to hate me and others. While mine refuses that simplicity. Christian nationalism is a religion of fear. Whatever I believe in, is a faith of boundary-defying love. Deep love enacted through compassion is, at least in my experience, the best way to resist violence.

I understand the instinct to other someone. Sometimes we just don't have the emotional energy to see someone in all their complexity. And sometimes that's fine. But, it can't be all the time.

And I get it. I really do. This us vs them thing is nice. It's efficient. It's easy. You know who's who and can move on to 'more important things.' We can be comfortable in our bubble. But this bubble of comfort can not offer a path towards liberation and healing.

I wonder if the important work we are being called to do, especially in as politically divided times as ours, is to refuse the learned behavior of enemy-making. Enemies are a great excuse for continued violence. It is easier to murder your enemy than murder your neighbor.

Our neighbors near and far must not become our enemies. Yet we're fed doctrines and policies that turn our neighbors into our enemies. We must refuse enemy making, on a personal and collective level.

And yes, of course I'm talking about Gaza. And of course I'm talking about inhumane immigration policies, and murderous healthcare funding, and about Nex Benedict. And I'm talking about any political thing we could ever talk about. And I'm talking about any life thing we could ever talk about. Because life is political. How we live is political. Who gets to live is political.

This ingrained practice of enemy-making is the very root of the dehumanization that admits, justifies, and perpetuates cycles of brutal mass murder. When we make someone our enemy, we dehumanize them beyond redemption. The systems of violence that we try to survive in are also practices that we enact onto each other. All of our actions either fuel or resist larger structural violence and the ideologies that empower it. How do we not continue violence when these interlocking systems are created and maintained through violence?

There are many more questions I could ask, and maybe some that I asked that you would rather I have not. A year ago I gave a sermon on sacred transness and said very simply, "We don't deserve to be persecuted. No one does." We must continue that compassionate resistance to violence today. Love requires a radical refusal of coloniality's lie of enemy-making. Love is the only way we can faithfully continue in these deeply unethical and violent times.

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Blessed be.

— Closing —

The hardest and most necessary work of our life is loving other beings. It's such a gift to be able to do this alongside each of you.

Please join us after service for a Deescalation and safety training led by my trusted friend Kenzie. Learning to keep each other safe has been a necessary part of my political practice and I hope you join us. Thank you.