

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 17, 2020

“Three Cups of Tea” (Acts 17:22-31)

A rabbi, an imam, and a Presbyterian minister step onto the stage. It sounds like the opening of a joke. But these men who first got together in the wake of 9/11 were the featured speakers at the 2017 Spiritual Directors International Conference I attended. I appreciated all that the Interfaith Amigos had to say, but it was an image the imam offered that really caught my attention. He spoke of three cups of tea.

Just the mention of tea perked me up. I was first introduced to this beverage as a milky, sugary concoction when I was a six year old visiting England with my family. I have never looked back. I may have no hope of becoming a sommelier like Vicki, but I cannot imagine writing a sermon without a mug of tea in hand. I savour those rare opportunities to enjoy a leisurely cream tea complete with an elegant tea pot, strainer, china cup and saucer. When the imam mentioned three cups of tea, I thought of my visits on my first pastoral charge in Manitoba. My Ministry and Personnel Committee had made it clear that I was expected to visit every household in my first year. Since Valley Charge was spread out over miles of prairie, I decided I would need a logical plan of attack and a strict schedule. I arrived at the first farm. Sure enough, in just over an hour, I covered all the necessary ground. I made the appropriate noises about leaving. “Won’t you stay for a cup of tea”, the farmer asked. I soon discovered that while this might throw off my schedule, it wasn’t considered a real visit unless tea and some sort of nibble were shared. When the teapot came out, the conversation deepened. At times, I felt as if I was sloshing my way around Valley Charge, but it was worth it.

For the imam, three cups of tea serve as a visual reminder of what we need to do when we meet new people: cup one is listen; cup two is respect; cup three is connect.

We start by listening. It is far too easy for us human beings to jump to conclusions, to pass judgements based on very little evidence. We look at the way the other is dressed: she's wearing a hijab / he's got a turban; she's in a gorgeous designer gown / his trousers are ragged; his jacket is soiled, and there's a hole in his runners. We listen to the way they speak: she has a difficult, unfamiliar accent / he peppers his speech with expletives - or don't speak like the wife of the imam who came to preach at Bloor Street United Church: she never uttered a word even during coffee hour. We notice how her eyes don't meet ours / how he - in pre-COVID-19 days - expects to kiss us on both cheeks. We recall what we have heard about that faith group, that culture, that country and conclude we know exactly who they are. We judge their class, their economic status, their educational level, and we slot them into the appropriate box. We may do all this without ever listening to them.

The first cup of tea is listen. The apostle Paul whom we meet today in our story in Acts has clearly done some listening. In his speech to these Athenians, he doesn't cite passages from the Hebrew Scriptures in which he as a Pharisee is very well versed. Instead, he quotes their own Greek philosophers, turning to Epimenides, one of the seven sages of Greece for "in this one we live and move and have our being", and to Aratus, a poet, for "we are indeed the offspring of God". We can imagine the Athenians nodding their heads: "this speaker may not be a Greek but he has taken the time and trouble to become acquainted with our great writers."

What happens when we listen to the other? Did you notice the article in the latest "Broadview" magazine in the section called "Glance / the United Church in Focus": "This Minister Listens to Her Community"? It features Ruth McDonald, a spiritual director, who

in May 2019 created the Listening Post in a quiet corner of the David Busby Centre, a downtown Barrie emergency shelter. There “the vulnerable and marginalized are listened to deeply without judgement... There, listeners provide no advice, just loving presence, compassion and respect.” It is a gift both for the speaker who feels heard, and for the listener who becomes familiar with another’s story.

The first cup of tea is listen - listen with attention to what is said and not said, to the feelings that lie behind the words, the issues that underlie the presenting problem. What might happen in our personal relationships and in our congregations if we were to drink this first cup of tea right down to the bottom?

The second cup of tea is respect. Athenian society loved debate. A speaker would listen to what the other was saying only in order to identify the points being made and prepare to refute them. We see a bit of this in Paul who uses Greek philosophers to support his own case for God, and their statue to an unknown god as a jumping off point for presenting the good news of Christ. Not for a moment does Paul entertain the possibility that he might learn something from these Greeks with their polytheism. Paul, as a good Jew who observes the ten commandments, is deeply distressed by seeing all these idols. He is absolutely determined to convert his listeners.

Times have changed since the first century, but we may still find it easier to enter into debate than dialogue, to make our points than listen to the other’s, to attack what the other is saying than open our minds to different ideas. As people of faith, we can get caught up in the particularities of our own path, and confuse it with the universal. We can argue that our way is the one and only. The imam mentioned that at one presentation of the Interfaith Amigos, someone in the audience so strongly opposed what they were

saying that he repeatedly tried to shout them down. When the Amigos asked: “is there anything we can say that could possibly change your mind”, he instantly replied: “no!” They responded: “and there is nothing you can say that will convert us to your way of thinking. So how about we simply share our stories?” And that’s exactly what they did: they listened as each spoke of their life and experiences, their hopes and fears for the world. They listened with attention and patience.

The second cup is respect. What might our world be like if everyone, everywhere had the opportunity to share their story with people who would listen with openness and respect? What would the United Nations, our Parliament, our General Council and church board meetings be like if we put aside debate and entered into dialogue in which we recognized how little we know and how much we can learn from one another?

The third cup of tea is connect. When we listen with respect, there is a chance we may see beyond the surface differences in the way we dress, speak and behave, beyond our various approaches to life and spirituality, and recognize what we have in common. There is a possibility of connecting heart to heart. This does not happen on the Areopagus. Paul is too intent on converting his audience, and these Athenians who hold the understanding of the soul as immortal are too appalled by the idea of a human being raised from the dead. Connecting heart to heart did happen for the Interfaith Amigos. At the beginning, they were so focused on sharing the wisdom of their own spiritual tradition that it was as if they were reading simultaneously from the Koran, the prophets and the gospels, in Arabic, Hebrew and English. They demonstrated that for us - a cacophony of sound, but no meaning. As they identified their core values - for Jews, the inclusivity of the one God, for Christians the love of God, for Muslims the

compassion of God - and as they dared to touch on topics which are usually taboo such as areas where each tradition has violated its fundamental teaching - they grew closer together. They even developed their own theme song which they sang with arms wrapped around each other.

When we listen with respect, connection can happen. Whether it is in a shelter in Barrie or around a kitchen table in Manitoba, whether it is at a Shining Waters Regional Zoom gathering for lay leaders or clergy or through a caller reaching out to someone on a telephone tree.

Three cups of tea. Listen. Respect. Connect. So very simple, but what a difference it would make in our lives, on our congregation, in our world, if we were to drink these cups and discover that deep in our hearts, there is indeed a common vision. Thanks be to God. Amen.