



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Rev. Bruce Sanguin

Mark 12:28-34

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22nd Sunday after Pentecost

“Rules of Engagement: Theological Conversation as Spiritual Practice”

A scribe overhears a “dispute” and notices that Jesus is more than holding his own. He decides to enter the fray himself. When I read this passage, this was as far as I got. My mind lingered on the significance of the theological discussion the community was having, likely facilitated by Jesus. I wasn’t so much interested in *what* they were talking about, but rather *that* they were having a theological discussion at all. Didn’t they have anything better to do? There must have been some cause somewhere that they could have been supporting. Why stand around and talk about God, when there was so much to do?

I know the text calls what they were doing a “dispute”, but when Jews get together to have theological discussion, it can sound more like a dispute than a conversation. But it’s not necessarily. Jewish libraries in the 1st century were not like libraries today. They were buzzing with lively conversation about one point of the law or another. It was just part of the culture. They gathered together to talk about God and the nature of ultimate reality.

I love this, because theological (or spiritual) conversation needs to regain a central place in the life of a spiritual community. We need to be talking about God with each other. I suspect we are in an era when people are a bit afraid of wading into these kinds of conversations for fear of being wrong or unorthodox, as though there are right answers to theological questions. But, I’ll let you in on a little secret. Nobody knows the answers! No minister, pope, theology professor or saint has the correct answer to the question of God. You can’t get it wrong! There never was and never will be a correct answer.

Having said that, there are more and less thoughtful ways to be in conversation. I realize that in our culture, religion is one of the Big Three taboo dinner table conversations. This taboo was instituted because we have lost the art of holy conversation. Our egos get talking about religion, and right away we want to make a point, *our* point. We’ve read a thing or two about this, and we’re pretty sure we’re right on the point. So, you end up with winners and losers, and some guy who feels like his point prevailed, while the rest of the guests go home thinking he

was an idiot. This is not the kind of conversation I'm referring to.

It takes practice to be in this kind of conversation, and one of the church's roles is to create forums for you to practice. My own observation is that our culture has become obsessively pragmatic. If it's not "useful", why bother? Our politicians want to turn the education system into a factory for future contributors to the economic system. But we might rather think about education as an extended conversation between students and teachers that becomes increasingly sophisticated over the years. The education system becomes the forum in which students learn the rules of engagement.

Imagine at CMUC if we taught our people the rules of engagement for holy conversation: bring your full intention to be transformed; bring a commitment to fully engage; bring a beginner's mind, where you suspend everything you think you know in order to make space for new knowledge; speak only from your most authentic self and only what you think will further the conversation; listen deeply to other; take risks in sharing your intuitions even if your thoughts may not be fully formed just to mention a few.¹

The ancient Greeks may have been the first culture to realize the sacred nature of this kind of

conversation, which they called philosophy. Socrates developed what became known, not surprisingly, as Socratic dialogue. He discovered that reasoned conversation taken to its extreme was actually a way of tapping into a sacred dimension, the mind of God. Our capacity for reason was our own little divine spark. His student, Plato, developed this system of rational discourse even further. But please don't confuse what Socrates and Plato were about with "talk, talk, talk..." They developed philosophical communities, whose life together was a daily, disciplined application of reason. Philosophy for them was applied reason. It wasn't abstract, like it can be today. Conversation was both an end in itself and the means by which you discovered how to live a sacred and virtuous life.

These philosophical conversations were not about developing a comprehensive system of knowledge, with the goal of knowing everything you could possibly know about reality. They developed rigorous techniques of helping people take the conversation to the very limits of reason, there to discover that what they *didn't* know was much greater than what they did know. Put another way, they discovered what they *thought* they knew was an arbitrary construction. This liberated them from preexisting, cultural assumptions that students unconsciously turned into fixed ideas, beliefs, and values. We do this all the time. By discovering what they didn't know, they were able to open up to broader, more encompassing and nuanced ones.

¹ From Craig Hamilton's Principles of Evolutionary Culture (www.integralenlightenment.com/pages/practices/culture.php)

One disciple of Socrates describes walking around in a stupor for weeks on end after a three-day conversation with his teacher. He found himself in a state of *aporia* – profound doubt – about the meaning he had made of life. He found himself, to use a phrase from our mystical tradition, in a “cloud of unknowing”. This cloud of unknowing would eventually lead him to live his life radically differently than when he had attained certainty. By loosening his attachment to his own belief system, he was able to consciously participate in the evolution of his consciousness. (You knew I’d get evolution in there, didn’t you?) In other words, the goal of reasoned conversation was to lead the participants away from certainty and into a state of mystery. Doubt was the philosopher’s ally.

This has always been the goal of theological conversation as well. We press each other to the very limits of our definitions of God not so that we can ultimately define God. Rather, it is to help us realize that all of our definitions of God fall short. God is ineffable mystery. And where the human community gets into trouble is when somebody or some community comes along with an absolute, definitive understanding of God. Run, don’t walk, in the other direction.

I remember seeing the film *Being There*, which practically caused me to have a psychotic breakdown. It caused me to doubt the entire foundation of my faith system. I was profoundly disorienting, but ultimately I reorganized at a higher level. Sacred conversations can do the same thing.

That’s why Jesus told parables. Parables are a literary genre designed to subvert conventional myth – the parable is a means of sneaking inside those conventional myths with a story everybody can relate to, and then once inside, the bomb goes off, and everything you thought you knew is shaken to the core. This kind of rigorous discourse is not always pleasant, but it is a way to evolve.

In the 9th century, Denys the Areopagite, developed a method of theological conversation intended to bring the participants to a state of contemplative silence, when all that can be said, has been said, and all that remains is to rest in omnipresence of the One who cannot be described in words. But he too, had rules of engagement. First, you define God. You say, “God is like a rock”. God is solid, supportive, the ground beneath our feet. Then you talk about how ridiculous this metaphor actually is: God is obviously not like a rock. A rock is inanimate, uncaring, and incapable of goodness. The next rule is to deny that you can even say anything about what God is not like: but you can’t even say that God is *not* like a rock, because God is so far beyond our limited capacity. Finally, you fall into silence, and know the unknowable One through direct experience. First, affirm, then deny, then deny the denial, then rest in the presence of the Unknowable One.

The paradox is that we participate in reasoned conversation about God knowing that we’ll never know, and what’s more interesting,

knowing that the very impulse to engage in this conversation, and the reasoning we bring to the conversation comes from the unknowable God.

We experience the unknowable One in the very act of trying to know God in through reasoned conversation that will leave us in a cloud of unknowing! ☺ Now, that's good conversation.

The conversation in Mark's gospel turns to the greatest commandment – Hear, O Israel the Lord, your God, is One and we are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbour as yourself.

What does that first part mean, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God is One”. In Hebrew, the word for “one” is “echadh”. The mystical tradition of Judaism, the Kabala, interprets this to mean that God is Oneness, the divine essence present in all of creation – unknowable in essence, yet paradoxically present in every part. Each part, even a leaf blowing in the wind, is a reflection of this divine Oneness. When we are able to see God in everything and everybody we respond with awe and love. We love God. We love the other as our self, because beneath, within, above and below our differences, we are expressions of the One God. What we have in common is original. The ways in which we differ are secondary to this fundamental unity. Our neighbour is an occasion of divine presence – as are we – so we love our neighbour as ourselves. And then we re-orient and re-orient and re-orient our lives around

this Hidden, Unknowable Oneness, that is nevertheless the most real thing about life.

Which brings us full circle to the importance of holy conversation. When we set an intention to engage our neighbour deeply enough in conversation we create the possibility of what Martin Buber called an I-Thou moment. This is when I recognize the unknowable presence of God in you. You cease to be an “it” to me, and begin to be a source of revelation. Or the whole group process becomes an occasion of divine presence. You become the presence of the Oneness, the Hidden Wholeness that is informing our conversation. In response, I may begin to love the God I see in you with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. God becomes beloved other through you or through the group. This is admittedly a rare experience, because, as I was saying, this kind of holy conversation is a lost art. But it is what Tantric Yoga is all about as well – the realization of sacred unity in our intimate encounters. Now please don't go away from here and tell your friends that Bruce said that good conversation lead to Tantric sex – although it might do wonders for attendance! ☺

So, we need to learn the rules of engagement at Canadian Memorial and beyond. I have run off copies of a document called the Principles of Evolutionary Culture. They are the work of Craig Hamilton, and I think they are brilliant. We are studying them at our staff meetings, and my goal is to have all of our various groups have a

conversation around them – a conversation about how to engage in holy conversation. Anybody who wants a copy can pick one up in the office after the service. If these become our practice, our way of being

in conversation, we will have established what St. Augustine in the 7th century called “the reign of charity” or the Kin(g)dom of love, in fulfillment of the greatest commandment.