

“Exchange as a Pathway to Change”



Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

October 10, 2021

Friends, have we forgotten one another?

Tell me, in our busyness, our fear, our desperation, have we forgotten we belong to one another?

Have we forgotten how to love one another, how to see the sacred spark of creation in each other's eyes?

Have we become so righteous and sure of ourselves as to think we do not need one another to survive, or that we are smart enough on our own accord?

Turn to one another, writes author, activist, and leader, Margaret Wheatley, *we must turn to one another turn to one another and see finally see...*¹

I invite you to turn to one another. If you are here in the sanctuary, turn to whoever is closest to you. If you are sitting some distance apart, turn and bridge the gap with eye contact. If you are online, turn to someone with you. If you are alone, pick up a photograph, look out the window at a person walking by, or close your eyes and allow a person to come to your mind.

Turn. Pause. And look. Look beyond your discomfort, feeling silly or concern you are doing this wrong. Look beyond your certainty that you already know the person at whom you are looking or your sadness that you don't know the person.

Look at this person and see the beauty. Imagine the warehouse of riches they have inside of them. This person at whom you are looking or whom you are remembering carries a lifetime of experiences, dreams, and questions. Like you, this person has felt sad, exuberant, and at times lost in life. Like you, this person questions, wonders, and hypothesizes and like you hurts, bleeds, and loves.

Now, bow to that person and turn to another, in the sanctuary or in your heart. See the face as well as you are able. Notice something perhaps you have not noticed before. Drawing on

1 Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., Oakland, CA, 2009, pp. 80-81.

“Generous Listening,” Marilyn Nelson’s beautiful poem that Nancy read, look at this person and ask yourself: *Who is this miracle speaking to me?* What do I not know about this person? What might we teach one another?

Now, bow to that person, and bring your awareness back to yourself. Take a moment to center yourself, maybe placing your hands in your lap, one palm cupping the other. Take a breath. Thank yourself.

You just took a leap of faith, connecting with another person, even without speaking. It takes awareness and courage to slow down, interrupt our assumption that we know the other, and instead ask questions about who we see. Krista Tippett calls this “moving away from the false refuge of certitude.”²

It is vulnerable to see one another, and it is brave. It is vulnerable to *turn to one another*, and it is essential if we are to find our way into meaningful conversation.

In her book *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Margaret Wheatley writes about the deep loss that accompanies forgetting to turn to one another. She writes, “We promise each ourselves everything except each other. We’ve forgotten the source of true contentment and well-being.”³ Which source is, of course, each other.

Martin Buber, Jewish scholar, philosopher, and activist, highlights the need for genuine connection and conversation. “Human life and humanity come into being in genuine encounters. The hope for this hour depends upon the renewal of the immediacy of dialogue among human beings.” In his seminal work, *I and Thou*, Buber writes about the necessity of connecting with other people in their sacredness and as they are, rather than objectifying them.

This kind of seeing moves from the “I-It”

2 <https://fs.blog/2017/01/krista-tippett-listening-questions/>

3 Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., Oakland, CA, 2009, p. 8.

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relationship characteristic of capitalistic and materialist thinking to the “I-Thou” relationship in which each person has something to offer. The wisdom and intelligence that emerges from an “I-Thou” encounter is greater than the sum of the individuals.

“I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again,” writes Wheatley.⁴ I imagine we all agree, and yet, do we listen? Yes, and I imagine we can do better. I know I can. There are many things that may deter us from listening better. We may be busy, stressed, or anxious.

Today I want to focus on difficult conversations, those that get in the way of genuine listening. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project define difficult conversations as “Anytime we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues at stake are important and the outcome uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed or about the people with whom we are discussing it...”⁵

The authors say there are three conversations happening underneath the surface of any difficult conversation, but three are rarely explicitly included in the discussion. These three subconversations include *figuring out what happened, the feelings of the people talking, and how the conversation interacts with each person’s sense of identity*. Awareness of these conversations, including our contribution to them and blind spots related to them, is what can transform a difficult conversation into a transformative conversation. To achieve that, however, we must be willing to be changed by a conversation.

Consider for a moment a difficult conversation in your life. It may be one that you are avoiding, one that is about to happen, or one that recurs

⁴ Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., Oakland, CA, 2009, p. 4.

⁵ Stone, Douglas; Patton, Bruce; Heen, Sheila of the Harvard Negotiation Project. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1999.

regularly. Hold that conversation in your mind as we explore each of the subconversations. Call to your mind the situation, issue, and person or people involved.

Now go deeper and think about the issue from the perspective of these subconversations.

The first subconversation is *what happened*. All involved have their understanding of what happened. If they are not careful, they assume others have the same understanding and often move forward without clarifying each other’s understanding of what happened.

Inherent in the *what happened* subconversation are also the tendencies to assign blame, assume who is right and who is wrong, and attribute other people’s intentions. Rarely is anyone to blame. Almost always every party contributes to a situation and has some part to play in what transpired. In addition to trying to assign blame, we are also prone to assuming what another person’s intention is. We respond to what we *believe* someone’s intention is in the situation.

The authors of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* say conversations are not about getting the facts right. They explain that difficult conversations “...are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values.”⁶

Rarely do we understand someone’s intention accurately. Sometimes *they* don’t even understand their own intention any more than we fully understand our own. Intentions and motivations are complex and multifaceted, often containing contradictions in the same space. For example, I may want change and fear the conflict it may bring. When we don’t know someone else’s intention, we generally assume the worst intention, which leads us to draw all kinds of false conclusions, leaving us feeling uneasy, defensive, and reactive.

And this leads us to the second subconversation, which is about *feelings*.

“...difficult conversations do not just *involve* feelings, they are at their very core *about* feelings.”⁷

Being honest about our feelings in a difficult

⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

⁷ Ibid, p. 13.

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conversation is often the last thing we want to do. Yet avoiding our feelings makes red herrings out of issues and distracts us from being able to discuss what can actually be done about challenging situations.

The third subconversation, and the one I find the most compelling, is the *identity* subconversation. Underneath what people are saying aloud during a difficult conversation, they are also asking themselves, “What does this conversation have to say about me, and who I think I am?”. It is in our nature to be wary of and fend off anything that conflicts with a perception we hold of ourselves, especially, if it is a positive self-perception. What might it mean to our perception of ourselves as a parent or progressive liberal or a tolerant person, if this difficult conversation were to reveal otherwise? What if I’m not as tolerant as I like to believe or as open-minded or as kind?

We lose the wisdom of group learning and decrease our ability to change when we avoid difficult conversations or don’t address the underlying three conversations of what happened, how do we feel, and identity. “When we humans don’t talk to one another, we stop acting intelligently. We give up the capacity to think about what’s going on. We don’t act to change anything.

Conversation is the way we discover how to transform the world together,”⁸ writes Margaret Wheatley. She tells us that to have meaningful conversations of any kind, we need to be open to the perception and experiences of other people and be generous listeners, staying curious about each other. Authentic conversation will be messy. We need one another to help us become better listeners and be comfortable in the mess. Authentic conversations take time, and we need to make the time for it.⁹

8 Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., Oakland, CA, 2009, pp. 30-31.

9 Ibid, p. 33.

I’ll close by asking the same questions I asked at the start of my sermon:

Have we forgotten one another?

Have we forgotten that we belong to one another?

Have we forgotten how to love one another, how to see the sacred spark of creation in each other’s eyes?

Have we become so righteous, so sure of ourselves as to think we do not need one another to survive or that we are smart enough on our own accord?

We must turn to one another.

Amen and blessed be.