

Calling to Account: How We Give and Receive Criticism

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One of you was nice enough to send me a transcript of an episode from last week's *A Prairie Home Companion*, which I missed when it aired, in which the private eye Guy Noir is hired by the coach of the football team from a Baptist college to scout out what's going on with the opposition in their team's big game that weekend against U.U.U.U., the Unitarian Universalist United University. What the Baptist coach couldn't figure out was why there was so much money being bet on this game, when the UUs hadn't won a game in 87 years. Guy Noir takes the case. He goes to the University and finds the football team at practice on the field, but instead of drills, they are sitting around a campfire and singing songs:

"They looked slender and gentle like soft tendrils. There wasn't much killer instinct there. The tackling dummies had flowers wrapped around them. The team was a democracy and everyone got equal playing time."

Guy Noir tries to instill some killer instinct in them, but he might as well be talking to the wind. When the big game arrives, the UU side has cheerleaders that yell

"Give me a U -- if you want to! Give me another U -- if you're comfortable with that! Give me another U -- unless you have to get going! Give me another U -- as long as it's approved by committee! "

Now the story ends with one of Garrison Keillor's signature plot twists; the UUs win the game and then it turns out they are the ones who have bet so big, against themselves.

Well that's how our movement is often caricatured by those outside it: wishy washy, embracing everything and standing for nothing. To what extent does this stereotype reflect a reality in our churches? In particular, I want to look this morning at how we handle criticism within the church.

Let me start with a comparison. In divinity school, I took a class called religion and public life and I remember once having a guest in the class who was the owner of a prosperous business somewhere in southern Connecticut. This man was a committed Christian, fairly conservative, and he tried to run his business by Christian principles. He had a church to which he contributed heavily, and he asked his church to hold him to account. By this he meant that he would regularly consult with the members of his church to determine whether he was really living up to his principles in the conduct of his business.

I remember thinking at the time, I wonder how that model would go over in a UU church? So much of what we value in our churches is freedom, the freedom to seek out own truth in our own way. In the words of Francis David, the founder of Transylvanian Unitarianism 400 years ago, we need not think alike to love alike. This is reflected in our core first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

To oversimplify just a bit, authority in the Roman Catholic church is founded in the church hierarchy and ultimately in the Pope. Authority in a Protestant church is founded in the bible. Authority in liberal religion is founded in the authentic religious experiences and feelings of the individual. And it is this diffusion of authority which presents problems when we are trying to all row the boat in the same direction, and to hold each other to account.

Now I never knew what happened to this businessman from Connecticut, but let's assume he is still working within his church. I assume that church has a shared set of theological beliefs, expressed in a creed which is said every Sunday, and a shared set of expectations that members are committed to being faithful followers of Christ. There is obviously much room for disagreement as to how that translates into specific actions in specific situations, but at least there is that shared set of values, and thus there is something to which our businessman can be held to account.

Do we have anything like this? We do not say a creed, we explicitly do not require or even encourage people to have a common set of theological beliefs. We are a happy mix of atheists, agnostics, humanists, Christians, Jews, pagans, Buddhists, New Age seekers and naturalists. So is there a basis for holding each other to account?

I think there is. We have a set of principles and purposes. And we have the covenant, which is over and under the principles and purposes. The covenant, as I see it, is the sum total of all the reasons that any of us has for being here. It may be singing in the choir on Sunday morning, it may be the fellowship of the Thrift Shop, it may be the good feeling of doing something worthwhile in the community, it may be social witness, it may be the pleasure of a good worship service.

But the covenant as I describe it is spongy and amorphous, meaning different things to different people. It does not provide a single yardstick by which we can look at a proposed action or one that someone has already done and say that this does or does not accord with the covenant.

In a sense, we are a feel-good church and this is generally a good thing. Many of us are refugees from churches who took it as their mission to make you feel bad every Sunday. This goes a long way back. As I am always lifting up, our two religious traditions, Unitarianism and Universalism, both arose in the late Eighteenth Century as reactions against Calvinism, which holds not only that humanity is inherently depraved since the Garden of Eden, but that most of us

are foreordained to eternal punishment in Hell and there wasn't anything we could do about it.

Our religious ancestors rejected this gloomy outlook, and still today, we do not try to make people squirm in their seats about their sins. The hells and heavens that most of us are concerned with in this church are the hells and heavens we create with our own hands, right here on this earth in this lifetime.

Last week I used the phrase beloved community to describe what it is we are after. It is a broad term, intentionally vague, but to me it describes a real ideal: a community whose central organizing principle is love. Not romantic love, not sexual love, though these have their place, and not always love in conventional dress, but also love in its institutional forms, in processes which insure fairness and consultation and participation.

What I think our churches are about, at their best, is a laboratory for what a beloved community can be. If we can get it right within these four walls, we can export it to the larger community, to our family, to the nation and the world. So we need to be quite conscious about what we do here, for we are forging the template for how we think the world ought to work.

And yet we practice community within a culture of deep respect for individual differences and individual freedom. I had a UU friend in seminary who as a convert from Mormonism. He used to say that he didn't understand why UUs get all mystic and dewy-eyed over the concept of community. He had escaped from a community where every thought, word, and deed of the members was dictated by the group, and it wasn't a pretty thing. We do not seek to be like the more authoritarian religions, but live in the tension between individuality and cooperative relations.

With that framework, let me now move to the specific question of criticism. Does the Beloved Community need criticism, and can it tolerate it? My answer is a resounding "yes." We all need feedback.

To be bound in covenant is to be accountable to one another. We who are in positions of leadership are accountable to the membership in particular ways, but the membership is also accountable to leadership, and all members are accountable to one another.

And at its base, this accountability arises just from the fact that we are all in an organization together. I am reminded of the story of the survivors of a ship sinking who were tossing about on the ocean in a lifeboat, when one of the passengers started drilling a hole in the boat. The others said what are you doing, and the passenger replied, "his has nothing to do with you, I am just drilling beneath *my* seat." Just by virtue of all being in the same boat, we have some restrictions on what we can do or say, because each of us has the power to destroy the whole.

Yet critical feedback is essential to any collective enterprise. If you are the only one who knows that the bridge is out ½ mile ahead, you have an affirmative duty to tell the bus

driver, or we're all going to be in the river.

And, contrary to Garrison Keillor's caricature, UUs do adopt a definite stand in the world, and that stand is often a trenchant criticism of some aspect of the larger culture. When James Reeb went to Selma in 1965, he did so as a protest against racism and as an affirmation of deeply held values of equality, and he paid the ultimate price for it. When this church put crosses on the front lawn to protest the war in Iraq, we were exercising our precious right to criticize. Today many UUs are in the march in Washington for GLBT rights.

I said a moment ago that some responsibility to criticize, and some restraints on criticism, arise simply from being in a collective enterprise. But we are not just any group, we aren't a civic club, a professional alliance or a sports team; we are a religious organization with religious values. How do we bring those values to bear on criticism within the church? I see three ways:

First, the value of love must precede and inform all criticism. When we undertake to criticize, we should stop and think, how do I approach this in love? Is my motivation to help advance the workings of the church, to keep us all from going into the river, or is it to put this person down, get back at him or her, or advance my own interests? A useful benchmark is the Golden Rule: how would I feel if someone said this about me?

From what I have been able to gather, criticism seems to have played a large role in the troubles of a few years ago in the Meeting House. This is water over the dam except to the extent that during times like that, churches sometime develop habits and cultures of destructive criticism that persist into the present. I am not seeing that around here now; maybe you addressed it with your two experienced interim ministers, but I wonder whether that experience makes us afraid of all criticism.

Second, if the criticism is actually a calling to account, we should not be ashamed of it or afraid of it. Rather, a calling to account is what we do in the Beloved Community as a matter of course. But we raise the criticism in an accountable way. If we expect the person criticized to be accountable, the critic must be accountable too.

The negative side of what I have just said is that we should not practice anonymous criticism. Anonymous criticism is a poison in a church. I tried to illustrate this with our story for all ages today. When anonymous criticism reaches the person who is the subject of it, generally nothing useful results. The only result is to make the person feel bad.

Another way of saying this is that if one of us has a problem with something that another has said or done, the best way to deal with it is to go to that person and tell them directly your concern. If A's problem is with B, A should go to B about it. The worst way to deal with it is to tell C first, because you have then created a triangle. Triangles of criticism are a stumbling block to the Beloved Community; they can drag a church down.

This is not new wisdom. The idea of triangulation comes from Family systems theory,

which is about 40 years old. But the idea that if you have a problem with someone, you should take it up first with that person is expressed in the reading I did from the Gospel of Matthew, written 2000 years ago. In that passage, Jesus prescribes a four-step process for what today we would call an intervention. First take it up with the affected person in private. If the person refuses the criticism, come back again with two other members of the church, so there will be witnesses. If the person still refuses the criticism, take it to the whole church. If he still refuses after the whole church has heard the matter, then he may be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector, that is, outside the church.

The first church I served, the UU Church of Wakefield, incorporated this bit of scripture in its by-laws when the church was organized in 1842. In other words, this was supposed to govern relations within the church. This is a remarkable testament to the enduring validity of this wisdom.

A third point in applying our religious values to criticism is that we do away with Calvinism in our criticism. In criticizing, we are not condemning someone to hell; we are not questioning his or her inherent worth and dignity in offering a suggestion as to how the order of service might be folded better or how the microphone might be adjusted. And those of us who receive the criticism must also not take it as a comment on our essential worth.

If you're like me, you're your own worst critic. I am a daytime Unitarian Universalist; my conscious mind is converted. The unconscious is something else. I have black-robed Calvinist judges which regularly meet in my bed at 3 in the morning condemning me to eternal punishment for some phone call I haven't returned that day. Thus when our hard-working secretary reminds me the next day to call Alice Jones, there is a part of me that will instantly see her as part of the condemning court, and I will resent her without even realizing why. If I am aware of this, I can realize that she is only trying to help and wishes me no ill.

Criticism involves so many layers in our personalities; when it echoes with criticism we ourselves carry, it is hard to meet it on its own terms. Speaking for myself, I welcome your criticism, I need the feedback, and I try to be constructive and gracious in how I receive it, though I don't always succeed.

Which brings me to my final point, a practical one. I have heard sentiments among you in the last few weeks that there are not enough avenues for feedback to the minister or the church leadership. I am going to try to create some more avenues, beginning with a talkback here in just a minute after I close this sermon. My door is open, my calendar is available, my phone numbers and e-mail are listed for anyone who want to discuss how it's going for you or anything about the church or my leadership to come to me to talk directly. In addition, we have had a Ministerial Relations Committee for the last year, composed of five members of the search committee which brought me here. We are in the process of reconstituting that committee with

three people, and will announce the lineup shortly. For people concerned with actions of the Program Council or the Board, the meetings of both are open and the minutes are posted on the kiosk downstairs. We are looking into ways to get these out to interested people by e-mail.

So, in sum we have three ways in which the practice of the beloved community affects how we give and receive criticism. First, all criticism should be preceded by and informed by love. Second, there is no shame in calling to account, but the critic must also be accountable, and this requires that we not practice, promote or encourage anonymous criticism. Third, we need to lighten up and realize, both for the critic and the criticized, that ones essential worth is not at stake.

To that end, I will close with the rather affectionate song that Garrison Keillor has the UU United University team sing after their surprising win and financial defeat in the big game against the Baptist seminary:

Unitarians, you're doing okay
At least you're not dark and depressing
The Baptists think they know the way
The Catholics are busy confessing

Baptists, they stand far apart
They look down on dancing and boozing
Unitarians love music and art
And our sermons are much more amusing

Unitarians, our churches are small
And sometimes attendance is tiny
But still we look up at the sky
And always the sun is still shining.

May it continue to shine on our Meeting House.
Amen.

Reading

Matthew 18

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the

evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

