

Flower Communion
June 11, 2018
Rev. Otto O'Connor

“All human beings have a commonality, more so than anyone thinks, we are all really exactly the same. We all are born. We all group up wanting to be loved. We all become an adult searching for love. A common thread that holds every human together is that we just want to be loved.”

Friends, do you think this is true?

This quote, this piece of insightful wisdom comes from none other than Bobby Berk, from the new *Queer Eye* reboot.

If you're not familiar with the show, or it's earlier 2003 version *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and the basic premise is this, someone, usually a guy, and usually straight, who is terribly bad at things like fashion, grooming, and design, is put on the show to have a complete personal “makeover” by five gay men who are experts in fashion, design, grooming, fine dining, and culture.

Ok, ok, it's full of stereotypes, but I have to say, this show is giving me life right now.

The episode where Bobby, the design expert, says the thing about love that I quoted, takes place in a town called Dallas, Georgia, and the man the “fab five” as the five gay men are called, are making over a white guy in his fifties named Tom who claims to be, and I quote “just a dumb old country boy from Kentucky.” And I considered doing this in his southern accent, but I didn't want to be offensive.... and/or make a fool of myself, let's be real.

Anyhow I just love this episode. The guys on the show talk about how *Queer Eye* is about promoting acceptance, not tolerance, and I realized in watching this episode that this was a message I needed to hear.

Because for me it's Tom, the straight white dump-truck driver from the South who I'd have a bias against.

I realized as I was watching this show, that I just never would have given that guy two thoughts as to who he would be willing to accept into his home. I would have written him off, totally, as unaccepting of me and the people I love.

Now, of course, he wasn't perfect. There's a great scene where he asked Bobby, the design guy, who is his gay marriage is the man and who is the woman. And Bobby he responds in a loving way, in an alarmed way, but in a loving way, and shares with him that that's not really how this works. They are both men in the relationship. Tom simply laughed it off and apologized. Neither party remained upset after the interaction.

It's a sweet moment about how we can handle disagreement, or moments of learning, when we are in relationship with each other.

Now, I know that a simple TV show isn't going to bridge these divides, but it certainly got me thinking about how to create relationships across difference; how to love across difference.

Social Work researcher and author Brene Brown talks about this in her most recent book "Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone." She talks about how we are all sorting ourselves into the worlds where we are around only people who are the same as us, think the same things as us, have the same political views as us. And she says that the only place where we aren't actively making that move, is with our families. Our families, often (though I know not always) are the places where we are willing to go the extra mile to maintain a connection and a relationship through differences in viewpoint and belief.

But what's more, she talks about how remaining open hearted to those who think differently than you, is the key to belonging. If you can remain curious in conversation with those who are different, those who think different than you, then you can actually strengthen your relationship with them, with that person.

Now I'm bringing all this up, today, on Flower Communion, because we are a faith tradition, we are a religion, based on acceptance of theological different beliefs. It's at the core of who we are. This ritual, which we learned is from a Czech Minister Norbert Caprek who needed something to honor the differences of theological belief in his congregation, and who needed something that wasn't too dogmatic, too Catholic, to be accepting of many different types of religious thought.

Now, this bouquet, with all of its different flowers, represents so much more diversity than simply our diversity of religious thought, but our diversity of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, family status, political belief. This is showing who we are and that we are all different.

And, I want to say this now, because, as most of you know, this is the end of our first year today, our first year with me as your Minister, and, for me, the year has been like looking at these flowers.

Before I started, at the beginning of the year, there was this beautiful bouquet of flowers that I saw from far away, looking at how the whole thing fit together nicely, a snapshot in time.

But during the year, it's sort of like I've come closer, and learned to see each flower and to see them all in their uniqueness and beauty. I've learned to see the incredible differences that exist in this bouquet. Flowers that are large and small and all different

colors. Flowers that obviously go together, and flowers where I wonder quite how they made it into a bouquet together.

And the true beauty of a congregation like this one, is that when you look at it from far away, you might see something that seems the same, homogenous, but when you come up close you realize it's not, and *that is precisely why* it can look so beautiful from far away. And each flower is part of what makes it whole.

And as you look at each flower you will see in each its beauty and its imperfection. Because like each of us, the flowers are simply a creation of the earth, and whatever perfection might look like, it is unknowable to us. And, like us, we are not perfect. But we are still beautiful. And, at the end of the day, they are all flowers. They share this commonality that is unbreakable. Just like we are as humans. We are all completely different, yet exactly the same.

In the wider world, beyond our walls, many see a world filled with violence and oppression. Some might look out and we see enemies all around. And folks are angry. And it's ok to be angry. It can even be useful sometimes.

But here, in this community, in this space, are things difference? What does it mean to reach out from here in love?

If we are going to bring the love of this congregation beyond walls, as cliché as it sounds, we need to begin by loving ourselves. By loving who it is that we are as individuals, yes, but by loving each other's uniqueness and individuality, too.

Because here we get to practice what it means to stay in connection with those who are different from us. Here we get to practice what it means, when the rubber hits the road, and our differences shine through, and we get a little uncomfortable, we get to practice what it means to choose to lean in with curiosity, to choose to open our hearts, to choose to get out of our comfort zone a little. And I've seen you all do that. If this church has challenged you to be in relationship with someone you probably won't be in relationship with otherwise, would you please raise your hand.

Each of us comes with these joys that we sometimes share, and these burdens that are on our hearts. We come to this church because we want to be with people who accept us, but not because we want to be with people exactly like us.

If you wanted to be with a group of people exactly like us, you join a club. This church, this Unitarian Universalist congregation, is stronger if we encourage and honor these differences. And, by the way, that also means that it's totally ok and even good for you to disagree with me and to tell me, and I promise I will strive to remain as open hearted as curious as I can to you.

So if we make this promise to remain in connection with each other, that means opening our hearts to love and to the possibility of being loved. And so I want to tell each of you here that you are loved. And what's more, that you are enough. Each and every person here is enough. In a world that asks so much of you, you are enough. Because we all want to be loved, right? That is what makes us all the same. And so don't forget that you are loved. You are loved by this community, by God or that which you consider holy, and you are loved by me. Truly. Each of you is.

When we come to the end of the service, each of us will come forward and take a different flower than the one we brought. This represents the fact that we will be present with each other as we search for our own truth and meaning in our lives.

And I want to encourage you to do something that might not come naturally to you. I want to encourage you to take a flower that you might not be normally drawn to. Something that a little outside of your comfort zone. We are not all drawn to the same kinds of flowers. What would it mean to take one that you wouldn't ordinarily take?

If we are going to bring our love beyond walls, we need to be able express that love here with those who are different from us. And as more people come in to our church, more differences will come out. If we want to grow, spiritually, emotionally, and in numbers, we have to accept that new people bring new ideas, no perspectives, and new identities. And we have to allow ourselves to be a little outside of our comfort zones.

But we can't do that if we don't acknowledge the ways in which we are also all very different right now. What does it look like if we connect with someone from a different background than us, a different age, a different opinion, who has been at the church for a different amount of time. What might it look like if we don't always connect with those we are most easily drawn to?

It won't always feel safe. Conflict is inevitable, disagreements are inevitable, but truly listening to someone else, approaching them with curiosity instead of defensiveness, can allow us to be transformed by seeing another as a human. Because safe spaces aren't actually possible. And we need to feel a little unsafe to grow. So, rather, let's create together a brave space, one where we encourage each other to be brave, to make mistakes in the way we talk to each other, and to bring each other back into the circle of trust.

So, during the cookout, try talking to someone you don't know as well, someone who isn't in your normal circle, who you would normally connect with. Ask them about something they accomplished in the past year, something they are proud of, and really listen? Ask them about a dream they have for this next year and really pay attention. And share of yourself, as honestly as you can, and allow yourselves to approach each other with openness.

And, as you go into the summer and we break from our regular worship schedule, remembered that you are loved, you are enough, and that this community needs you.

And so let us say together, Amen.