

I've Been Meaning to Ask, Where are you From?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Genesis 2:4b-15, John 1:35-51

It's probably an understatement to say that this past year and a half has been an incredibly unique and difficult time in our nation and our world...

I was having a conversation with someone who said that during the pandemic, she felt like she was being pulled apart, like her relationships were slowly being ripped apart at the seams. With all that was going on, the people she loved and respected for her whole life became almost like strangers. Conversations that once were simple all of the sudden were like walking through a minefield.

And she's not alone! It's almost like we've lost sight of the nuance and the complexity of our neighbors, even those people that are closest to us. So we cling to our labels and assumptions, and put up walls of protection between us.

For the next few weeks this summer, church is going to be all about building and repairing community. Worship will invite us to listen to one another, to find connection, to create space for compassionate dialogue and seeking the holy in each other.

We'll do this with four guiding questions that will (hopefully) lead us deeper into the heart of the matter. Perhaps this will help disrupt some of our assumptions and cultivate curiosity, deep listening and (God willing), stronger connections.

Courageous conversations begin with simple questions... and the first we'll be talking about today is "where are you from?"

It makes sense, scripturally, to begin at almost the beginning with Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, and the second of two creation stories. Today we heard one small part of the larger story of the Garden of Eden. As in the first account of creation, the world comes into existence according to divine initiative and design. But there are some significant differences here in this second account.

Here, the first human being, Adam, is made before anything else from adama, the Hebrew word for ground, for dirt. God forms Adam from the dust of the ground and then breathes life into him, making this story seem more

personal, as humans are planted and shaped with God's own hands rather than simply commanded to exist from a distance.

As you know, our Senior PF recently returned from a mission trip in Hancock County, Maine (an area considered Down East, not far from Acadia National Park). Something I noticed on this trip, perhaps more than others, was the interest sparked by those we met about where our group came from. Maybe it was just their curiosity to see dozens of teens pile out of 4 white vans... but it feels like every place we went I was asked the same question... "where are you from?"

One of our college advisors suggested we answer that question with "we're from Utah and we're a fundamentalist Mormon cult, so we're all related... one big happy family!" I think he understood the low-grade suspicion a group of teens might elicit from the average person; and wanted to poke a little fun at it.

Of course, we were open and honest about who we were and where we came from: "we're a church youth group from Monroe, CT. Oh, you've never heard of Monroe? About 18,000 people live there... smallish town. How about Bridgeport? North of that. New Haven? Yes, close by... good pizza there."

"Anyway, we're here doing community service, with land conservationists, H.O.M.E. in Orland, Loaves & Fishes Food Pantry, Comfort Cases and Age friendly Sullivan's bucket brigade. We're staying at a UCC church in Hancock."

After answering a few additional questions, we'd get a little "huh" in response.

Maybe it was strange to these Mainer's ears that a group of high school kids all the way from Connecticut would be there, of all places. After all, Down East is considered a major tourist destination, people spend lots of money there. It's not exactly an area we'd consider poverty-stricken.

But look a little deeper. See the lobstermen, struggling to make their income meet their rising expenses. Or the hospitality worker, bringing their children to every free church VBS so they wouldn't have to spend money on a sitter, in a tourist season when the Canadian border remains closed and hotel room rentals have declined.

We heard time and again how the non-profits that assist these folks had suffered during the pandemic. We listened as they told us how their regular volunteers (mostly in their 70's and 80's) had aged during this time, and how they had been unable to serve the hungry and the homeless because

donations to their causes were down and how the region (like so many others) suffered.

Unfortunately, we've learned over the years that we can go anywhere as a group and encounter poverty. I'm reminded of the individuals we encountered in places like Kentucky and Mississippi and the hardships they've endured due to lack of basic human needs like housing, food, health care and regular sustainable employment.

Sometimes on these trips we get the opportunity to ask the question "where are you from", and we try to do so with the utmost care and respect so that we might listen and learn. We come to realize that it's nothing more than sheer dumb luck that we were born into the situations we have landed in, here in pleasant middle-class, suburban Monroe. And we learn that our role as decent human beings is to have empathy and listen as we lend a hand.

How we ask the question is really important, too.

Dr. Raj Nadella teaches New Testament at Columbia Seminary. Originally from India, he came to the United States more than 20 years ago. And because of his name, accent, and color of his skin he gets asked quite often where he's from. He admits that when he's asked that question, his instinct is to respond with a question of his own... "Where are you coming from with that question?"

He says he's always curious about why someone might be curious about him. Are they asking in order to connect with him on a deeper level, or are they trying to treat him as an outsider? Are they going to use that information to build mutuality or will they use it to exclude him or try to fit him in a box?

Curiosity is about asking questions with care, thoughtfulness and diligence.

When we ask questions of other people, we can do so with respect for that person. We can end up learning a great deal about them, but we can also unlearn some of our assumptions.

In John's gospel, we have early on this story of Jesus call his disciples. Philip, as he begins to follow Jesus, is so excited that he wants to introduce Jesus to his friend Nathaniel. So finally, all three of them happen to be in the same place so that Phillip can make the basic introduction, saying... this is Jesus of Nazareth. Nathaniel's immediate reaction is cautious, as he replies "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?".

Philip simply says, Come and see. And Nathaniel did. And as he spent time with Jesus, he was amazed by what he learned, but he was even more blown away by what he had unlearned. You see, curiosity is about being willing to learn and to unlearn... it's about engaging the other with respect and care.

I've been reading a book by author Nicole Chang entitled, "All You Can Ever Know". It's a fascinating memoir about learning the story of her own adoption. From early childhood, she heard the story of her adoption as a comforting myth. She had been told that her Korean birth parents made the ultimate sacrifice in giving her up with hopes of granting her a better life. The feeling that she grew up with, of being slightly out of place, was simply her fate as an Asian girl being raised by white parents - parents that loved her to the ends of the earth. But as she grew up, she wondered if the story that she'd been told was the whole truth.

The memoir details how she eventually met her birth parents, who had told other family members that she had died at birth. She learned some of the family secrets. But despite that she never did get an answer to her greatest life question, which essentially is: where do I belong?

I've been wondering how the first Adam might have responded to the question, Where are you from? obviously Adam is from the ground. We acknowledge this origin story every year on Ash Wednesday when we say "we are made of dust, and to dust we shall return".

You see, each of us created in the image of God, God's beloved, each of us loved individually. We share a common home, a shared birthplace, a collective calling to sustain and to care for all of creation. And each and every one of us has a story to tell.

Each of us has experiences that have shaped us. We are the sum of all of it, we cannot be reduced to any one of them. In order to build the connection that we all crave, we need to listen to each other to learn who and what has shaped us, because then... and only then, we will be fully known.

That's when we see the sacred in the holy, and everyone around us.

So, what about you. Where are you from? I'm curious to know. Amen.