

TOXIC INCLUSIVITY

Acts 1: 1-4

Romans 12:9-18

Don't you just love ice-breakers? When you find yourself as part of a group activity, especially with relative strangers, some well-meaning facilitator invents an inane question that everyone has to answer. Like, "Tell all these strangers your biggest fear," or "What's your greatest accomplishment," or "What crimes have you committed in the last 48 hours?" And whilst group leaders who engage in ice-breaking activities always have the very best intention, wanting everyone to feel welcomed, and at home and included – For so, so many people, ice-breaker activities have the opposite affect.

About 15 years ago, I ran a group in central London for young adults who engaged in various political activities, and week after week we had a well-meaning young American woman, who'd been trained to make people feel included. And every week I would get complaints, especially from European folk, complaining that ice-breakers were alienating, shallow, pointless, and filled people with dread!

Thank God that kind of thing is no longer in vogue. But it does go to show that sometimes, communal practices observed with the very best of intent, in line with mainstream conventional wisdom about that is good and useful and helpful, can actually favour some people, and exclude many others. And I wonder how long it will be before currently unquestioned moral norms, become a historical embarrassment? And we want to distance ourselves from phrases like inclusivity and diversity and equality – because of how those practices have been invisibly co-opted and fetishized by the unwittingly privileged pundits of unreflective middle class morality! (That sentence made much more sense when I wrote it down half an hour ago)

But as we think about what that might mean in our setting, I'd like us to think about safe spaces. Of course, there is a helpful place for safe spaces. It's rooted in the hyper-individualism of CBT with its pedalling of 'unconditional positive regard', and widened out into a group setting. But what if Safe spaces come to dominate communal ways of being together? To what extent should colleges be "Safe Spaces", - or as Lara Montesinos Coleman argues, to what extent might they also, fruitfully and liberatingly, be "Vulnerable places"?

The emphasis on 'safe spaces' often comes from a place of love, from a desire to include, not to make anyone feel unwelcome or uncomfortable... And yet we also need to ask, who is everyone? How might that 'everyone' already be limited and restricted by our very ways of trying to be inclusive? How might an emphasis on safe spaces replicate patterns of exclusion, oppression, injustice and violence?

Because, in any real community – a college included – these are the kinds of questions that have to remain live.

After I announced the topic of today's talk, several of you – as you know – have come to give me examples that you have experienced. Whether at a school, or with friends, or with specific communities that share one another's experiences. My friend, Lara, who worked with exploited communities in Colombia who suffered at the hands of death squads funded by fair-faced corporations, Lara wrote about her experience of one of the most progressive, open, liberal Christian communities in the UK.

Because, who decides what is Safe in a Safe Space? What kind of experiences are validated in a safe space? And what kind of experiences do people feel they cannot share, because they do not fit with the dominant models of a group experience. The group could be wide ranging or specific. It might be a group where people share their struggles with mental health in general, or trauma in particular. And over and over again, in such groups its easy for some people to feel their trauma is not valid, is not serious, does not reflect those of most people. I have heard the experience of one Palestinian, who felt that her trauma was unsettling for people to hear – given current political sensitivities. So she left the safe space, because it wasn't safe for her. Or one black woman's experience of feeling excluded by a church, because that church's model of inclusivity was drawn up by middle class white folk with highly contemporary but rigid moralities. And of course, the struggles we face in current models of inclusivity across Cambridge, where the unwittingly or guiltily privileged frequently spout moral aphorisms and high-minded policies, without ever engaging seriously with the invisible people who deliver their shopping, or pack their bags or clean their office.

My friend, Lara, points out how Safe Spaces can, by their very nature, draw up exclusion zones, restrict ethical engagement, dictate what topics are valid and which are not. "We don't talk about that here. People find it disturbing."

She argues instead for something called, Vulnerable Spaces – where our stories might converge with those of people whose stories are wildly different from ours – stories that we might find unsettling, and disturbing, and even painful to hear. That we might enter into the experiences of others, so that we can truly hear and encounter them – without feeling like our own experiences and narratives and backgrounds are invalidated.

And yet, throughout all of that history, the message of Jesus of Nazareth has also been embraced by movements for liberation. Because that message - of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection - is the message of a convicted political dissident, born into poverty, displaced and wandering, a refugee who barely survived a massacre himself, who challenged empire and complicity with empire, who perpetually spoke truth to power - including religious power.

Because, if this is God, then it is God as representative of the outcast, the persecuted. Not the 'deserving poor' as objects of Christian charity but the wretched of the earth. The life of Jesus is not one of safety but of risk taken in love, of absolute vulnerability to shame, loss and death. If the church is the body of Christ, it is the mutilated body of a dissident. Again, I think about the idea of a vulnerable space, rather than a safe space is pertinent here - vulnerability from vulnus, the wound, vulnerability as an openness to being wounded. Only from here does redemption begin. Only from here is hope possible.

Every attempt at inclusivity based on comfort or safety is a false inclusivity, a false consolation. What is called for is costly solidarity, not to be a voice for the voiceless but to listen to voices it is easier not to hear. Including the voices that charge us with complacency or with complicity.

That reading from Acts is because today, is Pentecost – when Christian communities celebrate the presence of Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Otherness, who animates communities so as to bring challenge, and disturbance, and life-changing transformation. The Spirit who draws this community out of itself, to engage with different people, from different places, in different languages. The Spirit is the archetypal outsider, who awakens solidarity with those who are excluded, and animates unheard voices, and charges members of a community with a challenge that comes from beyond itself.

And the reading from Romans draws out the pain of being a political community that fosters and nurtures the idea of vulnerable spaces, built on healthy relationship and mutual trust – where pain and joy are shared, in such a way that people might grow. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. It's painful. And it's liberating.

INTERCESSION

Spirit of God, unseen but ever active, we praise you for the fruit of your work that we see all around us. From the darling buds of May, to the characters changed through the course of time, we see your hand at work. In all we take for granted, in all that fills us with joy, at every meeting of human hearts, we see your hand at work.

Continue your work in our lives, disturbing us when we are over-comfortable, and comforting us when we are vulnerable.

We thank you for the safe spaces, and the security, and the comforts that have enabled us to heal and thrive and grow.

And we thank you for the disturbances, the dangers, the challenges that we have faced, that similarly, have enabled us to heal and thrive and grow.

Give us the courage to emerge from our comforts when called to listen to others, to support others, to help others. And in their company, may our experiences with others make us more fully ourselves.

Soften our hearts, help us to listen fully to others, whether they are friends or enemies; words of people we will never meet, stories of people who need our help. Fan the flame of your spirit within us.

Reawaken our desire for service, inspire us to work for justice: in the family, in the nation, across the world. Whether the injustice is seen in a child learning to play, or a child who will not eat today – make your spirit blaze in our lives and in our church to establish fairness and justice in this world.

Open our beings to true communication: amongst those closest to us, on whom we depend and who depend upon us; between brothers and sisters in Christ; between colleagues at work and friends at play; between a wealthy nation and a broken world. Dwell in the midst of our relationships, so that your fruits blossom into being before our eyes.

Loving, Holy Spirit, May your flame burn within us, make us Holy and make us present to others.