

Comfortable with Discomfort

John 14:23-29

Sixth Sunday of Easter, (May 22) 2022

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*I've decided that learning to be comfortable with discomfort is one of the most important skills for leading a fulfilling life.*

- Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*, March 21, 2022

*But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.*

- John 14:26 (KJV)

I read a story this week about a woman in Arizona who woke up in her bedroom with a rattlesnake on the floor near the bed. She got out of bed on the opposite side, and the snake slithered somewhere else she couldn't see. Instead of staying in the bedroom looking for it, she left the room, closed the bedroom door, stuffed towels under the door, and called a local rattlesnake removal man. When he arrived, he found the snake coiled and rattling in the bathroom and removed it. The story ended with "it was found that the snake entered through the backdoor which had been left open."

This reminded me of the time at the Neighborhood, back when six of us clergy friends used to get together twice a year out at a ranch in West Texas. We had left the front door open and the back door open in order for there to be a breeze through the house, while we sat on the back porch. That night, after closing

everything up, we all retired to our bedrooms. I remember hearing Larry in the next bedroom moving stuff and making noise but I didn't pay much attention. Soon he knocked on my door and asked if I could come help him find a snake that he had discovered in his bedroom. Turning on all the lights and shifting luggage on the floor we soon found the snake slithering along the floorboard. Quickly I could see it was a Copperhead and as I pinned it with a forked stick, it struck the stick with two lightning-fast strikes. Using tongs, we were eventually able to get the snake out in the yard and dispatch it. Upon examination, we realized that when we had left the front door of the house open during the day, the screen door did not fit well and there was a gap between the door and the door facing.

In both of these stories the snakes got in because the door had been left open. You see what happens when you leave your doors open!

At Christmas, our neighbors across the street were sitting in their back den watching TV with the back door open, and suddenly a man just walked in. Told to leave, he attacked our neighbor. They got into a struggle and the man ran out the door. Soon the police found him. Apparently, he had a criminal record of breaking and entering people's homes.

For the next several weeks, all of us neighbors reminded each other, "Don't forget to lock your doors."

Open doors invite trouble. Who knows who or what might come through doors that are open? It's dangerous out there. It's threatening. It's unknown. Beware! Be careful! Lock your doors. Get a home security system. Maybe get a gun. Maybe building walls is not a bad idea. At least, build snake proof fencing!

It's enough to keep one awake at night, worrying, fretting over what might be lurking outside.

Jane likes to use a quote she heard from her parents about the farmer who said: "If it's not the hogs, it's the windmill." It's always something. If it's not snakes coming through open doors, it's intruders. Or it's Covid or climate change or mass shootings or attacks on members of the LGBTQ community. Or it's voter suppression and the attacks on democracy or the war in Ukraine or ... Every day it's always something and don't get me wrong, there is much that is truly anxiety producing and that we should be concerned about, while other things are accentuated and twisted in such a way as to capitalize on our anxieties and reinforce them.

Of course, using people's anxiety and fears is a time-proven way of governing and selling people something. Anxious and afraid people are susceptible to quick fixes. We don't want to be anxious and worried, and we don't like being uncomfortable. Both marketers and politicians know this well. A couple of months ago, the Florida legislature passed the Individual Freedom Bill, which Governor Ron DeSantis calls the Stop WOKE Act, in which WOKE is an acronym for "Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees." The bill basically broadens the definition of discrimination to include making another person uncomfortable over historical, factual events that involve people's race, nationality, or gender.

This is the Right-Wing idea that discrimination against White people, especially White men, today is a bigger problem than unfair treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in the past. And no matter what, we certainly do not want White people to feel uncomfortable with the truth of history.

Likewise, our own Gov. Abbott and Sen. Ted Cruz keep trying to find ways to stoke our anxieties. For example, both are using “invasion” language describing their interpretation of immigrants coming across the borders, with “those” children invading “our” public schools as well as taking away “our” infant formula, leaving little for “we” White people.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, one of the pioneers in family systems thinking said, “Our society is functioning like a chronically anxious family.” In other words, chronic ongoing anxiety is systemic. It’s everywhere. Anxiety is within us, between us, and around us. There are no clear boundaries, no preciseness. It’s in the air we breathe, invisible and potentially explosive like gas fumes in a contained space. All it takes is some critical instant, like striking a match, to ignite an explosion.

With all this talk about anxiety, discomfort, and doors open to the threatening unknown, it is interesting that our Gospel reading this morning is of Jesus giving his farewell discourse to his disciples (John 14-17). Once more, like so often, the disciples are behind closed doors. They are in Jerusalem during Jesus’ last week. Stress and conflict are building, opposition from the religious and political powers is becoming more intense. So, on this Thursday night, they are all gathered in the upper room behind closed doors, they share a meal with one another as Jesus leads them. While they are around the table, Jesus gets up and washes their feet and teaches them how to love one another.

The disciples begin to realize that Jesus is telling them goodbye. Their anxiety rises. It’s as if Jesus goes to the door, pauses there, as he takes his hat and

coat, he turns to them and begins to give them last instructions. He is leaving and this is who they can call and who will stay with them. He says, “I am telling you this while I’m still with you. But the Advocate, is going to be sent at my request. The Advocate will make everything plain to you, explain everything, and guide you. You’re not going to be alone, so do not worry or be anxious. Things are going to get hard. The Systems of Domination are going to get worse. But don’t be troubled” (John 14:25-31).

When Jesus tells us God is sending the Advocate, the Greek work is “paraclete.” Originally a term in the law courts, it means one who stands beside us and speaks, speaks both to the court on our behalf and speaks to us giving counsel. What’s translated as Advocate, can also be translated as Helper, Friend, Counselor, Encourager, Guide, and my personal favorite, the old King James Version translates as Comforter. All of these can be included in our understanding of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promises will come and be with us.

I find it interesting that Jesus promises us the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, while there is this national conversation worrying over White people becoming uncomfortable. Since when did comfort become our highest national aspiration as a people? Comfort seems to have become more important than truth, historical integrity, repentance, healing, and the way into our society’s future.

My friend, Peter Marty, who is the editor and publisher of the *Christian Century*, as well as the pastor of the St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, wrote in a column several weeks ago: “I get uncomfortable looking at photos of lynchings and police dogs attacking teenage girls in bobby socks. I get queasy every time I think of the injustice – or is it the crime? – of Black veterans being

excluded from the GI Bill or suffering the generational consequences of discriminatory mortgage policies. Contemplating decades of Jim Crow cruelty turns my stomach.” Then he gets to this sentence, “But I’ve decided that learning to be comfortable with discomfort is one of the most important skills for leading a fulfilling life” (*Christian Century*, March 21, 2022).

“Learning to be comfortable with discomfort is one of the most important skills for leading a fulfilling life” ... Here’s what I want you to know this morning – *It is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to help us be comfortable with discomfort.* The role of the Comforter is not to take away discomfort. We do not need to pass laws against anything that makes us uncomfortable. And contrary to Karl Marx, religious faith is not the “opiate of the masses” (which makes me wonder if this is an idea that Gov. DeSantis, Gov. Abbott, and Sen. Cruz like?). The Comforter is not a sedative or a way to ignore the truth. Indeed, the Holy Spirit, leads us into truth, with all of its discomfort. The Spirit of the Living God gives us the comfort and deep patience to face the truth and deal with it.

If we are going to grow and be transformed into the people Jesus calls us to be, then that means discomfort. Change is uncomfortable. As disciples of Jesus everything is about participating in the change Jesus brings to this world and to our lives. It means continuous discomfort, all the time, until we die. The Holy Spirit teaches us, leads us into the continuous discomfort of being changed, learning the truth, facing our failures, our blind spots, and our sin, repenting, asking for forgiveness, being reconciled with one another, and living out this truth in Jesus Christ in a world that does not want to be troubled.

The world and the people we are electing these days want us to close the doors and lock them, build walls and fences, get guns, hunker down and bunker up, and not have to face uncomfortable truth. But the work of the Living God we know in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the Holy Spirit, tells us to open the doors. Like the old popular TV series, *The X-Files* used to say, “the truth is out there,” and it is the Comforter, the Holy Spirit’s job to lead us into facing the truth no matter how uncomfortable.

Church is to be the place where we face change and the people with whom we can deal with the discomfoting truth of who we are and where we are without going into freeze, fight, or flight. Now this takes work, a lot of work, and it takes prayer, patience, and perseverance together. But this is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter working in us and through us with each other.

Essayist Rebecca Solnit remembers as a kid participating in the Jewish Passover meal. The Jewish tradition is to leave one place set at the table and to leave the door open for the prophet Elijah. The tradition teaches that Elijah will show up someday announcing the arrival of the Messiah, redemption, and the end of all time, therefore always keep a place at the table and chair for Elijah and keep the door open. Solnit said that ordinarily they locked doors in their suburban home at night, but “this opening the door at night, prophecy, and the end of time would have been a thrilling violation of ordinary practice.” Looking back, she writes that one of the most important things she learned is, “leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark” (*A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, p. 4-5). It is about giving up control, of letting go (p. 6), and being open to both epiphanies and dangers (p. 89).

But here is the rest of the Jewish tradition. The door is left open not simply so Elijah might come in, which he might very likely do. It is left open so we will go out and meet him and meet the coming Messiah, and redemption.

Notice the last thing Jesus tells us at the end of chapter 14: “Get up. Let’s go. It’s time to leave here and go out there” (v. 31).

We are meant to open our doors to the truth that makes us uncomfortable with our need for change. But that’s not enough. God, through the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Guide gets us up and goes with us through the open door into the unknown out there, where we might meet dangers but also meet epiphanies. God has something extraordinary and life-changing out there for us.

Years ago, a friend of mine was finishing his PhD in theology and ethics at Duke in Durham, North Carolina. Another hurricane had come through and there was no power in most of the city. It was dark and the radio was reporting looting in the city and was telling everyone to be careful and stay inside. So, my friend and his family hunkered down in the dark behind locked doors.

After a while, they heard noise outside, loud talking, movement, people outside. Was the looting reaching into their neighborhood?! Soon there was a pounding on their front door, “Heh! Open up! Is anyone in there? Open the door!” They hunkered down even more, afraid to make any noise that might attract more attention.

But the pounding on the door continued, “Open the door! Come on out! We have ice and water! Everyone in the neighborhood is coming out and



bringing their food from their refrigerators and freezers! We're going to have a big party cooking and barbequing. Come on and join the party!"

The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, leads us to open our doors and go out there. God is at work!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.