

“Together in a Sudden Strangeness”
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB, December 6, 2009

In the story of the birth of Jesus and in the play we have just been part of, the main characters are marginalized people. In our story the parents are poor and have few resources. When they get into trouble on their trip they seek help from the only place they find open, a gas station. The store owner surprises himself. He doesn't intend to help, but when he makes a human connection with the couple, when he sees the fear on their faces, he does what he can to take care of them.

This story reminds us not to let people surprise us. When we actually connect and interact with other people, we are able to deepen human connection and relationship. This is part of the work of building beloved community—caring for one another and opening ourselves to the stranger. At the same time, this openness can make us vulnerable. When we open ourselves to others we allow for the possibility that they may hurt or disappoint us. In the play today, if the gas station owner had not had empathy when he saw the couple's fear, they could have been left more afraid and lost. When the man opened his space to the couple, he became vulnerable.

They could have been con artists, or while he was attending to them, other people could have run away with his products or gas without paying, leaving him economically vulnerable. He also became emotionally vulnerable because of his involvement with the couple. He is now invested in their lives and who they and their child will become. The human connection between the couple and the man opened him to relationship and therefore vulnerability.

At the same time, are we not vulnerable when we are unconnected? The couple was so vulnerable on their journey because they were outside of their community. They were lost, they did not have enough resources to make the journey, and they needed support. The gas station owner, perhaps because of his experience of connection with his family, was prepared to be open to the couple. He had practiced being in relationship. We can guess this because his sister and her children were living with him, and so open to sharing *their* gifts. The Shepherd children came running out to offer toys from their own collection. This family had practiced openness to being surprised and vulnerable.

The bikers in the story are part of a riding community and were also open to connection. They enter the station expecting to pay for gas and instead see the new baby. They relate to the parents, and while they are probably not wealthy, they also offer gifts to the family. When they realized the couple needed help, they opened up from their position of being in community. They had the experience of support and care, and shared it with strangers.

As a community of faith, we are in a similar position. We are a gathering of people who come from as many different backgrounds, with as varied stories as there are people here tonight. AND, we have the experience of this community. It is here that we are able to practice being surprised and open. We open ourselves to one another, we share our experiences, worship, and work for justice. Our practices in this community prepare us for surprises in the rest of our lives.

It is a human truth that we make mistakes, that we are sometimes broken, and sometimes break relationships. Sometimes we experience this in our families of origin, at work, or in communities we are part of. By being in relationship and community, we are vulnerable. At the same time, we are strengthened by the support community offers us. Relationship is a risk we take as human beings. We do not choose our families, and sometimes they can be hurtful rather than supportive. Sometimes an inappropriate co-worker crosses the line. Sometimes a friend or partner is stuck in a cycle of addiction or violence. When our trust and relationships are broken, sometimes the appropriate thing to do is to change the relationship. We may need to be apart from a community or friendship, we may need to confront a colleague or family member. When we have the experience of broken relationship, part of the human challenge is to not let that experience change *all* our relationships. We are challenged to remain connected with our communities of support and care. To remain open to our emotions and to life. We may need to practice being in community again. We may need to open ourselves slowly, but we are here in religious community to do that work together.

This time of year is so much about celebration and connection. Those in the world who are marginalized, or alone can feel all the more isolated, which is another way to be vulnerable. It is so important that we be attentive to this as a community and that we practice making basic human connections that are the root of community and relationship. In our story today, if the gas station attendant had been asked abstractly if he would help a strange couple deliver a baby, what would he have said? We don't know for sure, but we do know that when he looked into the parents' eyes, he was going to help. In the busyness of this season, may we be attentive to each other. Take the time to look into each others eyes, connect and talk with each other and then with the stranger. Being in community is a spiritual practice that we covenant to work on together here. As we go forth into the world, we bring these skills with us. We have a core which lends strength to all the other work we do in the world.

May we be open to people surprising us. We are connected. We covenant to be in relationship and community. May we be stronger and more open with each other and in the world because of this practice.

So may it be. Amen.