

## “*The Conversation*”

March 9, 2008

Rev. Thomas G. Anastasi

Over the years I have spoken many times on the theme of “the conversation”. Some of the words I will say, I have said before. “You say I am repeating myself? Yes, I am,” T.S. Eliot has written. There are some things that are truly worth repeating.

I keep returning to that theme because I believe it is at the core of who we are as a religious people. The art of conversation is, for me, a monumentally important response to the great problems all around us in the world today.

Conversation is indispensable because it provides an effective alternative to the ways we humans usually respond to our disagreements. What I mean is, conversation is an alternative to violence, which is, of course, the most common form of resolving conflict. Just pick up the newspaper every single day and you will see how it works.

So this sermon is really about peace-making and peace-makers. It reminds us of former presidential candidate, Dennis Kucinich’s proposal to create a “Department of Peace” cabinet-level position in the U.S. government.

Of course, we’re talking about a Department of Love, not the Hallmark card kind of love, but genuine mutual regard. And we’re talking about the conversation that takes places between those who love each other.

A lover’s conversation cannot go wrong. It might go this way or that way; it might even get nasty, and it does sometimes. But the true lovers continue the conversation. And there are more ways than one to talk than with words (and lovers know that very well), but the words do get in the way.

As a minister, someone who deals in words all the time, I constantly wrestle with this dilemma. It is my business to know words and to use them and to use them effectively, presumably, even with meaning. My job, at least within the context of these sermons, is to take something that is within me, some essential thing, and move it across this space to touch you, the listeners. I have something here, whatever it is, good or bad, up or down, and I wish to move it from here to there. My job is to figure out how to do that. One way we all know about, of course, is words.

So here we are—all together on Sunday morning, in church: people, preacher, songs, readings, mediation, sharing, worship.

We are lovers here. We want love to be at the center of our relationship. As Martin Buber writes in today’s prayer, a very real kind of *communion* takes place, not of flesh and blood, but of our heart’s desire. That’s what true lovers do, and that’s what we should do.

Like lovers, we carry on a conversation which is founded on mutual regard and respect. Which means that the actual talk may go this way or that, but the conversation always continues. This is a basic element of what we call *the covenant*—the promises we make to each other about how we want our relationship to exist.

We’re getting at my pet theory of mine, which begins with the essential core of true religion—especially in regard to that word’s original meaning, that of the Latin word *religare*, which means “gathering or drawing together.”

True religion is something that happens, my theory proposes, *in the between*. It doesn’t happen *in* me or *in* you or in the trees or stars or ocean. It happens *between* you and me; *between* me and the earth and the stars; *between* me and God.

I’m not worth two cents without you. The worth happens in between. It’s in the conversation. Martin Buber said that true religion is “in the meeting.”

What I am—all that I am, my history, my essence, my faith—meets you and all that you are. And somewhere in between us, the magic happens. It’s what I call *eros*, and the erotic energy which flows between us when true conversation takes place.

The ground we stand upon becomes holy. We should remove our shoes then; we should cease our trampling, our parading, our marauding. The very space we inhabit together becomes holy, for it is the location of that which comes across, that which crosses over, what touches. It is that which infringes upon our solitariness—"where two or three are gathered," the gods attend.

So the question is still there: how do you get it across, the message?

I ran into this dilemma when I was a professional musician, traveling around the country with various bands, playing various kinds of music, meeting various kinds of people in various circumstances.

Here's the situation when you're a singer: there is a gulf between us, you, the hearer, and me, the singer—a gulf between us. And as a singer, there is something in me that I want to bring out of me and throw across the room to land into the hearer and somehow, *enter* into that person.

I found out in my musical experience that the conversation has little to do with the words. It was the *experience* of the song which made the connection. I am thinking that is also true of the conversations we have here and now. The words sometimes truly do get in the way, but the experience of the conversation is the essential meaning.

How do I get from here—inside me—to there, inside you?

Look at this: the word "converse" comes from the Latin word *conversari*, meaning "to live with, to keep company with." The true meaning of a true conversation is *the living together*. My life and your life is the song, the story to be told.

It's something about the spaces in between us. "The kingdom is within and among" us, we have heard. It's not here in me, or there in your. It's among us and among us with the world. John Coltraine, the great jazz musician, said that "soul" in music comes, not from the notes, but from the spaces between the notes.

It's a mystery, what happens *between* us. I believe that's where true Divinity is—between us. And the mystery happens through faith. We have come to the place where we can trust others and believe that they are truly wanting to come across to us. For it is only by trusting that we can let down the incredible barriers to communion which we have so elaborately erected over the years of our lives. Those barriers are nearly indestructible. But they can be broken through.

There can be no doubt. Relationship is something very basic about who we are as human beings and especially, I think, about who we are as a community of faith.

Kahlil Gibran wrote this in *The Prophet* in the section called "On Talking."

*And there are those who talk, and,*

*without knowledge or forethought, reveal a truth which they themselves do not understand.*

*And there are those who have the truth within them,*

*but they tell it not in words.*

*In the bosom of such as these,*

*the spirit dwells in rhythmic silence.*

*When you meet your friend on the roadside or*

*in the market place,*

*Let the spirit in you move your lips and direct your tongue.*

*Let the voice within your voice speak*

*to the ear of your friend's ear.*

*For your friend's soul will keep the truth of your heart as the taste of the wine is remembered.*

*When the color is forgot and the vessel is no more.*

May the words we say to each other be directed by our innermost beings. As I mentioned earlier, I was for several years a professional singer and musician. And I kept a proverb which I tried to use in all of my work. I actually carry this around in my wallet:

*The secret in singing is found between the vibration in the singer's voice, and the throb in the hearer's heart.*

