

What Is Your Problem?!
A Sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie
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Years ago I saw a cartoon, a single frame, of a man sitting in a chair in front of a television. Instead of a head there was a football on his shoulders. It's funny because we know people like this and maybe more importantly we know that we are like this in some ways. We all identify with something. Nationalism, sexism, ageism, and racism are all forms of identification. For that matter so are liberalism, conservatism, Unitarian Universalism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. And the extent to which we fiercely protect these ways of identifying ourselves, is the extent to which we are identified with rather than engaged with these ideologies. Fanaticism about any cause is extreme identification. It's an indicator of being cutoff from ourselves and others.

The more we are identified with our particular viewpoint or group, the less we understand people who do not have that identification. When we are strongly identified, we become angry when people question us or act in ways that don't fit our viewpoint. A simple example of this is when we get into our cars. We become identified with our desire to get somewhere and our rights on the road. We can get furious with someone who cuts in front of us on the highway, delaying us for perhaps a second. If someone does something that causes us to brake unnecessarily, that's grounds for murder. We say things, "What is your problem?!"

We can be identified with a belief, such as "No one pays attention to me!" or (this is a big one) "That's not the way *we* do things!"

My partner, Jennifer came with me to my mother's memorial service a year ago in May. And we stayed at my father's house with him. One evening we were fixing dinner and Jennifer was making salad and putting it on plates as is the custom in my family. She cut up some cooked beets for the salad into nice round slices. My father seeing this said to her, "We don't serve beets in such large pieces, we cut them into small pieces." My father was a very gentle man, easy to joke with. So, Jennifer just laughed and said, "Well, you can cut your beets in any size you like!" He laughed then too perhaps realizing the silliness of his statement.

This is a harmless example, but emotions can run really high over that kind of belief. Whenever the strength of the emotion exceeds the significance of the situation, we can be pretty sure we are identified with something that's being threatened. And when this happens, we don't understand ourselves much less the other person. An irony about the 'we've always done it this way' belief is that we are not able to even entertain how the new way might be or feel for us.

There is a story that was going around on the Internet, perhaps you read it. It's about a young woman who is at the airport and she's got about a half hour before boarding starts for her flight. So, she buys a magazine and package of cookies and sits down. She opens the package of cookies that's sitting next to her on an empty seat and takes one. A man who is sitting on the other side of the empty seat then takes one of the cookies. She notices this and is really startled. She's kind of annoyed but continues reading and thinks, well I guess I don't mind him taking one. Soon she takes another one, and the man takes another one too!! Now she's feeling more angry about it, but she doesn't want to make a scene so she decides to be tolerant. She takes another cookie, and this man

then takes another one. She looks over at him and he smiles and nods. “What is wrong with this guy,” she wonders, and she scowls at him but doesn’t say anything. Their flight is called and she gathers her things to board. Once in her seat, she reaches into her purse to turn off her cell phone. As she does, she finds the package of cookies that she bought and now remembers putting in her purse. All that time she had been taking this stranger’s cookies and where she had been angry and self-righteous, he had been nothing but friendly and gracious about it.

I wonder if you can relate to this in any way. I know I can. I have been absolutely furious with someone over something that either they didn’t do or that didn’t even happen. Why do these kinds of misunderstandings happen and what do they say about us? In the cookie story, the woman and the man have very different responses to the same situation. Each one sees that the other is taking their cookies without asking. The fact that they respond differently dispels a myth that we all hold dear. That we are made to feel angry or hurt by what someone did or said.

Here is another metaphor to illustrate what I’m getting at: Something drops on our toe and it’s badly injured. It’s painful and throbbing...after a couple of days, it no longer throbs and we are able to go about our business without thinking about it really unless something touches it. So we wear sandals or are careful to avoid anything touching. Then along comes a friend who accidentally steps on our toe. Do we break off the friendship? Rage at the person? The answer for most of us would be “no”. Because we’d recognize that the friend didn’t cause the original injury and that they didn’t intend to hurt us in that way. They are not really the cause of our pain.

But emotional pain in us even though it works in exactly the same way, blinds us to the fact that for the most part others are only ‘touching’ our wounds and not causing them.

A woman I knew years ago told me this story. She pulled into the parking lot of a 7-11 convenience store one day. She was driving a large Chevrolet and there was a pickup truck parked next to her. She was careful getting out not to hit the door of the truck. She went into the store and a few seconds later a man walked up to her and began yelling at her and calling her vile names, his face just inches from her face. He accused her of scratching the door of his truck. For reasons we’ll never know, this woman found herself remaining very calm and she said, “I didn’t touch your door.” The man began ranting some more insisting that she had. While he did this, the woman said she was very aware of him and his anger and felt compassion for him. She said, “I’m sorry you’re feeling so angry.” At that, he stepped back. And for a moment he was drawn back to himself. Now what he said may sound funny, but it wasn’t really because it was very honest and real. He said, “Forget what I said, I’m sorry. It’s just that I hate women.” He didn’t say it as a complaint, but with a kind of wonder as if he had just seen this for the first time. I’m sure there is a lot more to this for him than a hatred of women, many more layers underneath, but for that moment he was not identified and was able to step back and see his behavior and thinking.

Whatever his wounds are that caused his anger, he was closer to seeing them in that moment. And that is the key for us. The more we can be conscious of our wounds, the less we will be identified with them. And the more we can be honest in our relationships. In time, we can know when they are being touched and are more able to acknowledge or contain the pain without harming others with it. Doing this makes room in us for more reality, for others.

There are cruel or manipulative people in this world who are adept at finding people's buttons and pushing them purposely creating imbalance in the hope of controlling situations. You know when you've met someone like this because you feel ashamed or angry or hurt around them constantly. Knowing yourself becomes extremely important then. On the other hand, there are people who have a great deal of centeredness and calm in facing difficult situations. They are people who either don't have any emotional issues that are in play or are conscious of them and able to set those reactions aside. Those are good people to gravitate towards in a crisis.

They are usually good listeners but not prone to placate. These are people who are not identified with any side but rather have an interest in the truth or finding a good solution. If they present a solution it is with clarity and they are able to answer objections or questions generously without getting upset. Like the man with the cookies, they are not anxious when someone encroaches on their territory because they are not defending anything. Come in...look around they seem to say. See anything you like? They know there is no limit on the truth; it's available to everyone who seeks it. They are also not afraid of not-knowing the answer. They are not afraid of waiting for an answer to become clear. In general not being identified means not being afraid.

In our meditation, Henri Nouwen speaks about a new place that we can come to in ourselves where we are "being held in love." What does that mean to us? For some people that is being held by God or by Jesus or any number of images people have of God or the Infinite. For others it is feeling at home in the universe, by that I mean really knowing that we belong, that we are a creation of nature, crafted with the same meticulous care that all other beings are crafted.

I think one way we experience this is when we are accepted and loved by another person in spite of all of our foibles and brokenness; someone who knows us well enough to see beyond our mask and defenses. We get a taste of that other place then. It is even a more profound experience when we ourselves, perhaps encouraged by another, can begin to see ourselves this way; when we can love ourselves in spite of our reactions and patterns and problems.

It is not necessary to be "fixed" or healed to find this new place. Rather it is in finding this new place that we begin to be able to see ourselves more clearly and let go of some of our reactions. When we feel that we are worthy of our own attention, we can *see* ourselves reacting in the way we always have when someone cuts us off in traffic or doesn't do things the way we want them to or says something we interpret as hostile and any number of other situations. And as we live through that pain, very gradually we gain strength in our new place of consciousness.

I have had some deep reactions to feeling neglected or not cared about in my personal relationships over the years. This comes from the very real pain of emotional neglect in my childhood. But I am not neglected now except to the extent that I might neglect myself. Sometimes I will still tap into that pain though and it can be fierce. One day, Jennifer and I were cleaning our garage together, when her daughter, Julia came out to tell us that she was playing with her guinea pig on our bed and it had pee'd there. No big deal really, pretty easy to clean up and Julia went off to take care of it. I reacted though very strongly first feeling hurt and then enormous anger about the fact that Jennifer had allowed this to happen knowing that I am seriously allergic to the guinea pig. In this moment though, I saw the incongruity between my anger and the situation. I remember observing myself and saying out loud, "Ok, I'm really angry now." I could not stop my feelings and I began to weep

uncontrollably. I was able to let Jennifer know as she put her arms around me that it wasn't about the guinea pig and she understood because she knows about this tendency in me.

It is important, I believe, to be able to accept our emotions without judgment but with deepening awareness. It is the awareness that gradually loosens the hold these conceptions have over us. If we think we shouldn't feel this way or that we have no right to feel that way, we will stifle our very healing process. This is the meaning I ascribe to the statement attributed to Jesus: "Know the truth and the truth shall set you free." The truth is within us to discover by paying attention to our beliefs and our emotions that come from those beliefs. That attentiveness will lead us into a healing process as these areas of strong identification are gradually dissolved in the light of our own mature intelligence.

Then we will not have to be afraid of our emotional reactions, we can think of them as guides in our explorations.

In this poem, that I would like to close with by the Sufi poet, Rumi, this idea is celebrated.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house,
every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

--Rumi

May it be so for us.

