

Based on Psalm 23, in response to the question: *How do we build community in a divided America?*

The first email said: *It's time to introduce you to Pastor Joel.*

I replied, *Do you mean Joel Blunk? I know him! He's great!*

The second email said: *No. Joel Rainey.*

To which I replied, *Oh, okay, sure. Just let me know when.*

The third email invited the three of us to get together.

To which Joel replied: *How about breakfast?*

So there I was at the Bavarian Inn, catching up with our host, when I confessed I did not actually know who Joel Rainey is. Our host replied: *The Pastor of Covenant Church.*

Big gulp.

The table was before us, the host was a friend of both of us, and the host thought we would have more in common than we might imagine, given that he is the Pastor of an evangelical Southern Baptist Church and that I am ... well ... *not!*

We began with ordinary pleasantries, relying on our host to carry the bulk of the conversation. Until finally I blurted out something along the lines of: *So, Pastor Joel tell me your story.*

He did not immediately have an answer ready to share, so I jumped in to share my own, much of which I also shared with you last Sunday: that my passions throughout my ministry and my life have been connected to social justice (I held nothing back); that I am now feeling drawn more deeply into ministries of healing and wholeness, as a Reiki Master and Spiritual Director. That SPC seems to be a place where all of that can be integrated. That I really love it here.

I concluded by saying that if there was one word to describe my sense of call these days it would be: *healing.*

Joel jumped in, ready now to share his story, prefacing it, as made sense, with his identity as an evangelical Christian. The word he would use to describe his sense of call is: *reconciliation.*

Healing and reconciliation. Perhaps our host was on to something. Those commitments do not seem so terribly far apart.

As the conversation continued, I learned that Pastor Joel joined me in horror over the corruption of Jesus by those who invaded the US Capitol Building on January 6. It turns out Pastor Joel, like me, came back to the pulpit the next Sunday with a clear denunciation of what had happened and the use of Jesus to justify it. I do not know for sure, but I suspect that was a much greater risk for him that day with his congregation than it was for me with mine. And I respect him for it.

The much harder part of our conversation skated along the glaring disagreement we have over what I call sexual justice and what he calls sexual ethics. At one point in the conversation, I considered inviting Pastor Joel to read a book by a prominent evangelical Presbyterian about how he changed his mind toward affirming the LGBTQIA+ community. A split second later, I imagined how I would respond if he asked me to read a book that argued the opposite. I had to concede in my innermost thoughts that there was no way I would read such a book. So I let it go. For now ...

This was and is a painful point of disagreement, and I do not want to sugarcoat it. I have no intention of sacrificing the blood of the LGBTQIA+ community - or any other community - in service to building a broader sense of community in a divided America. Any community that is true community accepts us as we are, in the image of the God who created us as we are.

In that spirit, I would never ask anyone for whom this is personal to engage with those who feel like *the enemy*. But for those of us who can, without sacrificing our own well-being, the risk might just bear fruit for us all.

True confession is that I, too, would not always have been able to take such a risk. As a woman in ministry to meet with a Pastor whose congregation belongs to the Southern Baptist Convention, with their recent ruling *against* women in ministry, such a meeting would have been more than I could have risked, emotionally and spiritually, at other times in my life.

But, as I shared with you last week, I have finally come to a place in my life and in my ministry where I *know* deep in my soul, that I am Beloved. Called by God for just such a time as this. Graced beyond measure that nothing can shake me, not even the proclamation of the Southern Baptist Convention. It has been a journey to get here, but now I *know* the God who is my shepherd walks with me through the valley of the shadow, anointing me, feeding me, chasing after me with goodness and mercy. I *know* this table before us is real, no matter what enemies may try to take it from us. Our soul can be restored.

This is why, I believe, if we have any hope of building community in a divided America, we must begin at The Table. Firmly fed in our own Belovedness, no matter who we are or what we have done or what we have left undone or what we have had done to us.

If we have any hope of building community in a divided America, we must begin with a conviction that the table before us is indeed *for us*, and that our host knows exactly what she is doing in bringing us to it, even if the one we think is our enemy has been invited to the table along with us.

To be sure, one conversation with one progressive pastor and one evangelical pastor in one small town, West Virginia, cannot hope to rescue a divided America. But it's a start. Indeed, as Margaret Mead reminds us, the only thing that ever really changes the world is when a small group of thoughtful committed citizens decide to do so.

After just one breakfast with our host, Pastor Joel and I did find common ground. A commitment to healing and reconciliation that challenges both of our congregations, as well as ourselves, to do the hard work of loving our neighbor, as Jesus told us to, even when we do not think we could very much *like* our neighbor.

To that end, I asked Pastor Joel to consider coming together for some kind of public gathering as we near the 2024 Presidential election, calling our one small part of the panhandle to the better angels of our nature. In return, he invited me to join a conversation at Covenant Church about how best *they* might engage in the public square.

And so it has begun. A journey with an uncertain destination, brought about by a host who just wants us all to be well.

I may not have tried so hard to find common ground with Pastor Joel if we were not at such a fragile moment in our nation and in the world. But we are. I may not have tried so hard to find common ground with Pastor Joel if the Blood of Antietam did not still stain our sanctuary floors. But it does.

And so I pledge to keep trying, not in spite of our values at SPC but in light of them, and I hope you will join me, as your conscience and the well-being of your soul permits, trusting our Host will keep us safe, as he guides us and strengthens us and sustains us at The Table.