



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Strong Back, Soft Front: Giving Up Our Defenses”

John 4:3-30, 39

March 4, 2018

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I didn't see it coming. I was at a dinner party talking to one of the other guests. One minute we were having a calm discussion about reducing gun violence and then I heard him say, “Amy, surely you must agree with me that any form of gun control is a violation of the Second Amendment.”

I like to think that I'm good at responding to people that I don't agree with. I say things like, “Tell me why you've taken that position. Help me understand how you got to that point. Tell me more.” Or I just listen.

I hate it when people use my first name to tell me what I think. “Amy, surely you must agree with me...” I don't respond well to that. That backs me into a corner. So, I said, “No, I don't agree with you. Not at all.” My voice got louder and higher. I was annoyed and ready to argue. And that's what I did. I argued. I defended. I disputed. As everyone else around the table got quiet and uncomfortable.

I'm not going to share the details of the rest of that conversation because I don't think I come across well in it.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience. Or maybe you haven't. Many of us no longer hang out with people with whom we disagree politically or ideologically.

This is not a new phenomenon. Verse nine of this morning's text reads:

Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

In the time of Jesus, Jews didn't interact with Samaritans. They have their reasons. To the Jews, Samaritans are the worst kind of people—they have been in the fold, but they have abandoned the sole worship of God and intermarried with non-believers. So,

Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

What's wrong with these ancient people? Can you imagine writing off entire categories of people? Yes, we can.

- Republicans do not share things in common with Democrats.
- Presbyterians do not share things in common with southern Baptists.
- Members of the NRA do not share things in common with supporters of gun control.
- Right to life advocates do not share things in common with people who identify as pro-choice.

In recent years, this kind of sorting has intensified. We have retreated behind our bunkers and spend more and more of our time with people who think the way we do. This was a topic of conversation in a recent interview of researcher and author Brené Brown. She said,

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

Nine times out of ten, the only thing I have in common with the people behind those bunkers is that we all hate the same people.... I call it “common enemy intimacy”...¹

That is a good description of much of what we are experiencing these days.

That day in Samaria, it would be so easy for Jesus to engage in common enemy intimacy. All he has to do is wait for the disciples to return from their errand and they can talk about all the ways in which they dislike Samaritans.

That’s not what Jesus does. He walks straight towards the Samaritan and starts a conversation. This person isn’t just a Samaritan. She’s a “she,” a woman. At a time when respectable men didn’t speak to women in public. It just wasn’t done.

Jesus speaks longer with this Samaritan woman than he does with anyone else in all four of the Gospels. And their conversation is substantial—it is about life and death and God and truth. The Samaritan woman proves to be a worthy conversation partner for Jesus.

All that happens because Jesus is willing to step out of his bunker. It’s something he does regularly. He appears to be unwilling to write anyone off. “Leave no one behind” seems to be his motto. At our best, that is our motto, too. Brené Brown recently completed a tour promoting her new book, *Braving the Wilderness*.

She says,

I’ve probably been in front of realistically, 25,000 people...on a book tour across the United States. And every time, I ask the audience, “Raise your hand if you deeply love someone whose vote in 2016 you find incomprehensible.” And 99% of hands go up. ... Then I ask, “How many of you are willing to sever permanently your relationship with the person you love, because of their vote?” And maybe one or two hands go up.²

Like Jesus we don’t want to write anyone off. We want to stay connected with those we disagree with.

But, how? How do we do this hard thing?

I recently asked a group of Broadstreeters how they approach conversations with people they disagree with.

- I avoid them.
- I run the other direction.
- I listen, but I don’t say anything.
- If I know ahead of time that I will be having such a conversation, I come up with all sorts of clever, snarky things I could say and I practice saying them so that I don’t say any of them in the actual conversation.

We all agreed that such conversations are challenging and don’t always end well.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/> Her new book is *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*.

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

Jesus is a great role model, a great teacher in all of this. For starters, Jesus and the Samaritan woman talk to each other. Face to face. Again, Brené Brown:

People are hard to hate close up. Move in. When you are really struggling with someone, and it's someone you're supposed to hate because of ideology or belief, move in. Get curious. Get closer. Ask questions.³

People are hard to hate close up. It's easy to hate from a distance—on Facebook, on Twitter, from the safety of our armchair watching the news. People are hard to hate close up.

So, move in, get curious, lean forward. And... take time.

This conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman takes time. Jesus is in no hurry. He asks her questions and then listens to the answers. Really listens. Too often what passes for listening is that we stop talking only long enough to formulate our next argument. Brené Brown admits:

One of my worst defenses when I get anxious or fearful in conflict is to put people on the stand. I break into vicious lawyer mode and depose people rather than listening. It's terrible. It always ends badly.⁴

So many of us do that and she's right. It never ends well. The best way to avoid that is to double down on listening. Listen with the exact same amount of passion that we want to be heard.

Because true conversation, true relationship involves listening and being heard. If all we all do is listen, then we have not fully participated in the encounter. We have not shared the truth that is in us. Again, Jesus is our role model. He never backs down from his core convictions. He carries around with him this confidence that who he is and how he lives his life and what he believes is enough. That enables him to transcend tribe and allegiance. All the time. And he inspires a movement, a tradition that, at its best, does the same.

Brené Brown calls this having a strong back and a soft front. "A strong back" refers to our groundedness, our calmness in the face of turmoil, our boundaries, our core identity, our wisdom, experience, and discernment. It is how we hold our place in the world and in our contact with others. It is good to have a strong back.

The soft front is how we move toward others in a spirit of compassion and open-heartedness. It is how we really hear what others are saying. The soft front is our kindness, our vulnerability, our love, our loneliness, our grief. It is how we are human together.⁵ A soft front enables us to move out of isolation into relationship.

Jesus has a strong back and a soft front.

When we enter into difficult conversations, the temptation is to have a strong back and a well-guarded front. That is exactly what I did in the conversation I referenced at the beginning of the sermon. As soon as I felt threatened, I became defensive. How I long to go back and re-do that conversation. I want to say, "When you speak that way—when you tell me what I believe—I shut down. Can we start this over? Can you share with me your thoughts on this subject—using sentences that begin with 'I'? And, I will try to do the same. Let's try to listen to each the same way we want to be heard." Would the conversation have gone any better if I had said these things? Frankly, I don't know. But I wish I had tried.

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

⁵ https://pilotonline.com/life/moments-grace/article_5b7cb2fb-0aaf-54c4-af82-d068cb20477e.html

This is hard, hard work. Never harder. Have I mentioned this is hard work? Never harder.

The alternative—avoiding one another, yelling past one another—it isn't working. It really isn't working. It didn't work in the first century. And it doesn't work now.

May we be people with strong backs and soft fronts, as we try to be more like Jesus.

Amen.