



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Being “Othered”

Clay Nelson © 7 April 2019

Sometimes a sermon just won't behave. It refuses to accept its fifteen minutes of fame are over and go quietly into that dark night with a whimper. Last week's sermon insists on being chewed on and savoured but never swallowed. It prefers to haunt the recesses of my mind demanding, not closure so I can move on unchanged, but discomfort, daring me to move forward into a deeper understanding of who I am. I want to scream at it to go to its room, “bang the door if you like, but go.” I need some respite from all the uncomfortable questions the tragedy in Christchurch has wrought like a snow globe vigorously shaken. “Too bad,” the cheeky sermon taunts me. “You will have no peace of mind until I give you a piece of mine.” And so, it goes. I relent. Last week's sermon has reclaimed the pulpit, to tell us, “Ahem, let us do go on.”

One of Aotearoa New Zealand's treasurers is Kim Hill. I am in awe of how well prepared she is week after week for her Saturday morning radio interviews with a wide range of guests. Her ability to draw them out into a comfortable conversation that intelligently delves into something deeply meaningful is a wonder to behold. America is blessed to have their own Kim Hill, Krista Tippett. I would love to hear them interview each other.

In my search to find some peace I encountered a quote by the poet, essayist, and playwright Claudia Rankine during an interview with Krista Tippett, “How can I say this so we can stay in this car together?” Her point is every conversation about race doesn't need to be about racism. But she says all of us — and especially white people — need to find a way to talk about it, even when it gets uncomfortable. Her bestselling book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, catalogued the painful daily experiences of lived racism for people of colour. Claudia models how it's possible to bring that reality into the open — not to fight, but to draw closer. And she shows how we can do this with everyone, from our intimate friends to strangers on airplanes.

During the interview Tippett draws Rankine out on her need to write *Citizen*. Her response was she found so much of the language she heard in her daily life was unmarked as racist, leaving her angry but yet uncertain about trusting those in the car with her who use it. She then set about collecting her stories and she asked friends to recount such times in their lives.

She tells of asking a lawyer friend in LA, who was the definition of cool, to come to dinner and tell her everything that's ever happened to him. And he did. He came over, and he turned into a different person. He cried at our dining room table. His wife, who's white, had never heard any of these stories. And she completely changed after that dinner.

At this point, to make her insights less abstract Krista asked Claudia to read a portion of *Citizen*. “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words. Haven't you said this yourself? Haven't you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would

call you by the name of her black housekeeper? You assumed you two were the only black people in her life. Eventually she stopped doing this, though she never acknowledged her slippage. And you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don't forget. If this were a domestic tragedy, and it might well be, this would be your fatal flaw — your memory, vessel of your feelings. Do you feel hurt because it's the 'all black people look the same' moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?"

Claudia goes on to note that the last line was the hardest line to write in the book, because I was thinking, is it because she's a servant? OK, come on. What is it? And then I realised, it really is about intimacy. When it comes down to it, the space between us gets violated in these moments, and you get othered.

Krista asks, "Right where you don't expect to be othered?" Claudia confirms, "Where you don't expect to be othered."

In the course of their meandering conversation about how unacknowledged racist language violates our ability to be intimate, Claudia shares an insightful experience on a plane.

"I was on a plane, and there was this white guy, and he was nice, and he asked me, 'What kind of music do you like?' I said, 'I like 'Night Shift' by The Commodores.'" And he's like, "I love 'Night Shift.'"

They proceeded to sing that song on the plane helping each other recall the lyrics, two strangers. She thought to herself, he's the kind of person who, had I met him in my real life, we probably would be friends. And then he said to me, "I don't see colour." And it was like, whoa.

But the amazing thing that happened was, somehow, I said — I don't even know how I did it, but I said to him, "Ah, that's not such a good thing to say." And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I'm a black woman, and you're a white man. And I want you to see that. If you don't see colour, you're not seeing me. And if you can't see me, you can't see racism. And I want you to be able to see those things." And he said — and this is the moment that I loved. He said to me, "Did I say anything else?" And I said, "No, that was it."

It is not only people of colour being "othered" by our fears of intimacy or having it violated. Claudia tells of being invited to speak at a university graduation. The university was about two hours from the airport and she had a driver to take her.

"[The driver] was a white woman, very working-class. I asked her if she voted for our current president, and she said yes. She was very defensive, very 'yes; and so what?' And I said, 'I'm just curious why. Was it healthcare? What was it?' She said she had Obamacare, but she didn't really believe in healthcare. She didn't believe in doctors because when her husband went to the doctor, they said he would live for a year, and he lived for two months. She started crying as she was driving the car.

"We got to talking. And then she told me she lived in a double-wide. I had no idea what a double-wide was, but I didn't want to ask her what a double-wide was because I didn't want her to think I didn't know what a double-wide was — not because I care about not knowing, but I wanted to share whatever her situation was. And then I figured it out, that it was some kind of trailer park that was double wide.

“And then she told me this heartbreaking story that she usually went to visit her sister in Washington, D.C. But this year, there was a crack in the double-wide. So she’s not going to go this summer so she could work through the summer, so the guy could fix the crack in the double-wide before the cold came. And I said to her, ‘Well, how much do you think it’s going to cost?’ And she said, ‘About 300 dollars.’ And then I spent part of the ride, thinking, ‘Should I just give her the 300 dollars?’ I didn’t do that — but it was just a different reality.

“And then I asked her, what did she do when she wasn’t driving? And she said, ‘Well, I do theatre.’” Apparently, there was a church in town, and they had asked for actors, so she comes, and she does theatre. All of a sudden, this woman became this whole person — who still would probably vote against my best interests, my life possibilities, and all of that, but was a whole person, with a lot of pain, and was making a life the best she knew how. By the time we arrived, she’s like, ‘It was great talking with you,’ and I was like, ‘Great talking to you.’ But it made me think — I’m often being driven by people who are not me, and I spend a lot of time thinking about, how can I say this so that we can stay in this car together, and yet, explore the things that I want to explore with you?”

I think Unitarian minister Krista Taves explains how we manage this in her account of her father teaching her how to drive:

“Like many teenagers, my dad taught me to drive, and given that I was deep into that adolescent time of self-differentiation where my dad could do absolutely nothing right, I really wasn’t looking forward to spending hours in the car with him telling me what to do! But I was a country kid, and for country kids a driver’s licence is your ticket to a social life. It seemed like all that time with my dad was a sacrifice that would pay off pretty quick!

“Dad started my teaching with a hard jolt. I’d had my learners permit for two hours. He piled the whole family in the car, and said, ‘You are driving me, mom and your brothers to Oma’s for dinner. Our lives are in your hands. If you make a mistake we could die. Let’s go.’ His first lesson was that every time you drive a car, other people’s lives are in your hands.

“In the days to come, we spent hours crawling at slow speeds on the gravel roads around our farm, graduated to the undivided highway, mastered rush hour in Leamington, Ontario with its population of 15,000, and parallel parked all over town. But the road that scared me most of all was the motorway. On the day we finally approached the on-ramp to the 401, the busiest motorway in Ontario, I could feel myself shaking and he asked me to pull over when the onramp came into sight.

“‘Motorways are easy to drive once you’re on them,’ he said. ‘But the most dangerous place on a motorway is where the onramp and the highway merge. When you are going up the onramp, climbing in speed, you have to keep an eye on the end of the onramp, you have to keep an eye on who is in the lane that you are going to merge onto. Are they slowing down or moving over to let you in? If they do, you’re set. If they don’t, you have to slow down and wait for your chance, eyeballing how long you have before the onramp ends and moderating your speed. When you have a chance to safely merge, go for it. That’s lesson 1. ‘Lesson 2 is just as important. Once you are the one on the highway, it’s your job to watch every onramp that you approach. If someone is merging, don’t make it hard for them. You will move over or slow down so they have a safe entrance to the highway. Do you understand?’

“I didn’t. ‘So you’re telling me I have to be ready for other people not making room for me but I always have to make room for them? Why should I make room when they don’t?’

“‘Well,’ he said, ‘You can choose to be a selfish driver and I can guarantee you that you will be dead sooner than you should be. You can be selfish and dead, or generous and alive. When you respect everyone on the road, even if they aren’t respecting you, then everyone is safer. You are more likely to come home at night and so are they. I want you to always come home.’

“At that moment, he was no longer the father I lived to rebel against. He was teaching his child the art of hospitality.”

If you’ve been around here for a while, you know I do go on about joining us for our sacrament of hospitality, morning tea. It is a whole lot more than making polite conversation over tea, coffee and some goodies. It is about intimacy. It is about not othering others or being othered. Hospitality is literally the art that will save us from our fear of each other, it will save us from turning each other into threats that can be dehumanised and dismissed, it will save us from being a people who keep killing each other. Hospitality is how we keep ourselves open, open to love, open to being changed, open to growing more deeply connected to life.