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DURATION

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3 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

Speaker3

START OF TRANSCRIPT

**[00:00:00] Speaker1**

Good morning, WellSprings. It is an honor to be with you today, although I'm going to be honest, I am a bit sad and disappointed to not be in Bell Hall with the worship leaders and the band and the amazing tech crew as I had originally planned for today. But as has happened so often in the past two, oh, sad two years the virus and this time in the form of the al-Muqrin variant, has just taken our plans and wrecked havoc with them. But while I'm heavy with that disappointment and weighed down with the ongoing uncertainty of this pandemic life, I am also filled with some gratitude today gratitude for the wonder and technology of the internet that allows us still to safely from wherever we are, gather together and get our souls recharged. So I am grateful WellSprings to be here with you. You where you are. Me here in my home in Milwaukee. Today's message more formally kicks off our series on neighbors and helpers, and while Reverend Ken started that a bit last week in his beautiful sermon to us as he talked about the community of Saints, an idea I'm going to return to. I've been thinking very specifically about neighbors, neighbors, which is such a funny word. It comes from an old English word, which comes from an old Germanic word that literally means nearby. Nearby dwellers and even the Latin of it and the Latin languages. French, which is veocin Spanish, which is Vecino, have the Latin roots that are English word vicinity comes from.

**[00:01:47] Speaker1**

Some neighbors are whose nearby and the accidents of geography. Sometimes the intention of politics that look like accidents of geography really do shape who we get to know. But I have a story about neighbors, but I think is a little bit funny for me. At least. You see, my husband and I have lived in this house for 20 years. We literally 20 years ago this month closed on this house and were packing and prepping to move in. We had both lived in apartments or communal life since we were teenagers. He in various residence halls, in boarding, school and college, me just in an entire string of apartments. I think between the age of 18 and 22, I moved at least 12 times and there is a certain amount of anonymity and transience and apartment living that can be fun and that can have a certain comfort for it for some people. But we had been longing several years into our marriage to set down some roots. And I'll be honest, I really wanted a dog. And so we searched and we planned and we bought this house. And as we were packing up one afternoon, I was talking about my dreams for the house, which again mostly centered around how many dogs would we get? What kind of dogs would they be? What would their personalities be? What would the neighbors think of our dogs? And as I rambled on excitedly dreaming of the kind of dogs we would have.

**[00:03:25] Speaker1**

My husband looked up from the box he was packing and said in a horrified voice, Hey, does getting a house mean that I'm going to have to talk to the neighbors? Now, my husband is not shy, but he is an introvert, and he needs a fair amount of downtime and a long time to recharge his batteries, and so he's pretty selective about where and how and with whom he spreads out his energy. And so his question made sense to me, but I laughed and assured him, No, I'll be the friendly one who talks to everybody. You can just nod and wave in the background. And that has been obviously fairly true of our 20 years of living in this house and in this neighborhood. But my husband has been neighborly in his own way. He has been the kind of person who pays attention when he when someone's car stalls and he offers to dump their battery. He has been the kind of person who takes the snow blower down the entire block when he knows that some other neighbor only has a shovel. He's been the kind of person who also pays attention when the police pull someone over in front of our house and he'll stand and record just to make sure everybody's safe. He's not a friendly person, but he is a conscientious neighbor.

**[00:04:55] Speaker1**

And in watching him and learning from him in these 20 years in this house, he has taught me a lot about the different ways that a neighbor can love and care and community. And while I am the friendly person who taps and gets to know you, that has meant that I've been excited to explore different neighborhoods and got to know new people. And so when I accepted the internship at WellSprings, knowing that it was halfway across the country, I was excited about expanding my notions of neighbors. And so I spent, and I am not exaggerating. Weeks and weeks in the summer, looking up maps of Chester Montgomery County and the Greater Philadelphia area, getting to know the names of roads and towns, looking at WellSprings website and all that you do and who you are and trying to get a sense of. Who will my neighbors be when I come to WellSprings? And then I came and was warmly welcomed and by so many of you. And as I got to know more people, I had the immense joy in September of making a great connection with Susan. Susan Havens. Now, Susan has been a member of WellSprings for quite a while, and she and her husband are both. I'm so glad to say, serving on my internship committee. The internship team that is guiding me during my two year internship at WellSprings and when Susan and I talked, she shared so much about how she and Bill have been involved in the greater community in WellSprings itself, about her career as a nurse and their family, and all the ways in which they love their neighbors.

**[00:06:49] Speaker1**

Susan also shared with me about a meaningful connection she has as a member of WellSprings to the broader community in Chester County. And she shared with me about the interfaith action community of Chester County. And I lit up interfaith work is something I have a deep personal and professional interest in. And so when Susan began to share some of the work that Interfaith has done and the ways she, as the WellSprings liaison, tries to stay connected and be the bridge between our community and the IAC, I knew I wanted to learn more. So I went and joined their Facebook page. I also side note found the interfaith Philadelphia and looked at all the different interfaith work that's happening all over. But the interfaith action community of Chester County particularly interested me because I was really glad to know that here in not the urban center, there are many, many different faith communities that are active and thriving and that are working together. To build community. And so when this opportunity to be able to think about who our neighbors and helpers are right here, I knew what I wanted to focus on for you and for me was learning more about the interfaith action community.

**[00:08:15] Speaker1**

And so I was able to reach out not just to Susan, who shared so much with me, but also to Rabbi John Cutler of the Beth Israel congregation and to Cathy Meltzer, who is one of the current chairs of the IAC. And they both were so generous and sharing wonderful information with me about the history of the IAC and their current work. And I'm really glad that I have the opportunity to share that with you, WellSprings. Rabbi John is has been leading his congregation for quite a while, and he he in the wake of the 2016 election as many folks around the country were, was sad and worried and wondering what to do to respond. And for him to respond from his tradition as a Jewish man and a Jewish leader to what seemed like not to seem like but truly was a rise in hate in our country, a rise in the kind of rhetoric that shuts down community that others people, and that puts us on a dangerous road. To marginalizing the already marginalized. So Rabbi John looked around and he saw in his own congregation the sadness and the fear, and he said that he talked to folks in other faith traditions here in Chester County and could sense that in those more progressive, progressive churches, there was also a sense of fear and a sense of people hungering for community and connection. And so he put together back in 2017, five years ago, now a unity Shabbat, a unity prayer service at his synagogue that invited Catholics and Episcopalians and Lutherans and Quakers and Muslims to come together and to as a community of religious pluralist, to say there is a counter-narrative to the far right evangelical message of There's only one of us and only one right way that that message of hate that seemed so prevalent is a false narrative.

**[00:10:40] Speaker1**

Rabbi John says. And they all of those people from the various communities here in Chester County who are people of faith wanted to be able to demonstrate that people of different faith traditions not only can but do come together in love and unity. And so they gathered for the Unity Shabbat, and they had prayer and they had a sermon and they had choirs from various traditions sing. And people were moved and inspired and left that unity Shabbat feeling a little less heavy than when they had come in. Rabbi Jones said he thought perhaps it might end there. That's what their goal was to leave people uplifted and they were. But it didn't end there because so many folks were inspired by that, by that vision of unity, by the uplifting that happened at the unity Shabbat that then some folks at St. Elizabeth Catholic Church decided they also wanted to do something more interfaith. And so they reached out to Rabbi John, and they talked to some of the folks from the Islamic society and said, We know that Ramadan, the holy month of Ramadan, is coming up and that that folks need to gather for Eid to to celebrate and break their fast.

**[00:12:03] Speaker1**

We would like to host an Eid feast for people to break their fast and for the Muslims in our community to know that they are welcome here and for the folks in our community to learn from the Muslims in our community. And they work together. The three different faith traditions, and they held a feast at St. Elizabeth's with no real expectations of what would happen. But Rabbi John said on that first Eid celebration, two hundred and seventy people showed up for the feast for learning and honoring, learning about and honoring their Muslim neighbors. And that spark of joy that had been planted at the Unity Shabbat bloomed at the Eid festival, and the interfaith action community became more formalized that spring. Prayer is a big part of what the interfaith action community does, how they centered and learn from each other, and they offer a day of prayer each year. A day of prayer for peace in 2020. Our own Reverend Lee even participated in that. And I have for you just a clip of Rabbi John offering a prayer of peace from his tradition. I offer that to you now as a way of hearing and feeling the unity of prayer across a faith tradition.

**[00:13:53] Speaker2**

Shalom, I am Rabbi John Cutler of Beth Israel, Congregation of Chester County. And I like to offer a prayer for my faith tradition for this day of prayer. Modi new look for expanding grandeur of creation world's known and unknown galaxies beyond galaxies, filling us with all and challenging our imaginations. Modi monocular for this fragile planet Earth, its times and tides, its sunsets and seasons. Modi new acknowledged for the joy of life, its wonders and surprises, its hopes and achievements. Modi enough new look for human community, our common past and future hope, our oneness transcending all separation. Our capacity to work for peace and justice in the midst of hostility and oppression. Modi Narula for the high hopes and noble causes with faith without fanaticism. For understanding of Us' not shared Modi monocular for all who have labored and suffered for a fairer world who have lived so that others might live in dignity and freedom. Modi, a national lock for human liberties and sacred rights for opportunities to change and grow. To affirm and choose Odem and Morlock, we pray that we may live not by fears, but by our hopes, not by our words, but by our deeds. Barakat and I had to somehow Lahore at Lahore Dogs. Blessed, are you Lord? Our God who loves his? Who loves all of us? Amen.

**[00:15:58] Speaker1**

Rabbi John's prayer, which speaks to our fellowship as humans, has a bit of an echo for me of our own Unitarian Universalist beliefs. And that finding our commonalities is a little bit of the work of what the IAC does when they come together. Rabbi John shared with me that they really have three goals in the IAC and developing fellowship is the first one just getting to know each other. Breaking down our ignorance and our fear of who the other is. And broadening our understanding of who our neighbors are. I mentioned earlier that neighbor means who is nearby and that in America, who is nearby has so often been people who were just like us. And so to go beyond our comfortable borders and talk to neighbors who are different and see that we have a shared humanity that is a goal the developing of fellowship that the IOC has. And their second one is then deepening that fellowship by breaking down misunderstandings and building deeper knowledge of each other. So educating each other across our faith traditions about what we believe and how we practice. It's a way of seeing what those universal commonalities are, but also of recognizing how valuable and important differences are not to denigrate those differences or see them as dividing us, but to see them as a respectful way that we each express our relationship to the divine. So fellowship and education are big parts and ongoing parts of what the interfaith action community in Chester County does. And they have been doing this yearly monthly, I should say, for the past five years.

**[00:18:08] Speaker1**

So they have monthly meetings and they also in those monthly meetings while they are doing fellowship and education, they are also looking at how do they take action because the part of coming together is neighbors is to recognize our needs and respond to them. And so their third goal is to engage in social action that is meaningful and needed in the community right now. So much of what they have done in the past five years is to respond to the needs of folks in Chester County by saying who is hungry? And let us feed them, who is unhoused and how do we help them access shelter? Who are new immigrants here? And how do we begin to break down barriers for immigration? They've expanded their interfaith network to include Hindus and Baha'is and Unitarian Universalists Buddhists. Their education has expanded so that people are learning more about those faith traditions, and they've engaged dearly even during the pandemic as best as they can and what they've named not just a day of prayer, but also a day of hope. And the day of Hope is about taking action. For this year, two thousand twenty two, their day of action is going to be centered around celebrating diversity. I know that many of you in WellSprings know that there has been a lot of debate. I'll use that term loosely and disagreement, particularly in the schools, about the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion. And so there have been folks who have gathered to protest that. And then there have been folks from the interfaith action community who have shown up, just as Rabbi John said all those years ago, to be a counter voice to the voices that would silence us, who would spread hate and and division.

**[00:20:21] Speaker1**

The IAC shows up to say no diversity is one of our strengths as people. And is that that idea that diversity makes us stronger? That I also heard from the other person I interviewed for this? Cathy Meltzer is one of the chairs of the interfaith action community right now. And Cathy was raised Catholic but has been a Lutheran most of her adult life and is an active member in St. Matthews. I have to make sure I get it right. St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, which she's been a member for 32 years. She's a retired school teacher, and while she is deeply grounded in her own faith tradition, Cathy expressed how much she values learning about and from people from other faith backgrounds. And she said to me, diversity makes us all better that when we can. Reach across want to make sure I get this right? Reach across our difference into our shared humanity. We can find common passion and build bridges across difference and build capacity for change. Cathy said to me that like Rabbi John, she really values being able to take action that presents an alternative voice to the voice that says differences don't matter to the voice that says we all have to be the same, or that only one way is the right way. Cathy says the power of the interfaith action community for her is that it uplifts her to know that there are groups like this that fill in the gaps that leave people behind, that we can all across our faiths work together to feel supported and safe and to know that what we are doing matters.

**[00:22:24] Speaker1**

And I think for me, that is the critical piece of interfaith work of spiritual work in general. I began this message by saying that I'm sad and disappointed that I'm not with you there in Bell Hall. I know that we are all sad and disappointed and weary of this pandemic and of what seems like the never ending struggles for justice. And yet and yet when we look up and lift our heads, we can see our neighbors even when they are different from us, even when they have faith practices that we would never partake in. We can see folks with shared values who are working on the same goal of building a beloved community that is, in Kathy's words, uplifting. When I think about what can sustain us through the ongoing difficult days we are currently living in and through the ongoing work that the needs of the world are going to demand of us. It is knowing we are not in the struggle alone, knowing that there are Rabbi Johns and Kathy Meltzer's and Susan Havens Lang and thousands and thousands of other neighbors who invite us into the work of what we can do in this moment. Kathy, in talking with me, quoted the great activist Dorothy Day, who said all we can do is take one action in this moment in this moment.

**[00:24:19] Speaker1**

It reminded me actually of a quote from the Talmud that I love and that inspires me. And that quote says, I'm going to paraphrase here do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's work. Do justly now walk with God. Now you are not required to finish the work, but nor are you able to abandon it. We don't have to finish the work. We can't finish the work or do all of the work. But what we can do is what is in our hands in this moment, no matter if we are the kind of neighbor that gets to know everybody's name or one that simply waves in the background. We all we all can be the neighbor that uplifts another that shares a value and builds a bridge. That is what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to do, and it is what our neighbors are inviting us to share it. I want to leave you with this message from Rabbi John inviting us to take part in the day of action that's coming up in May that the IAC is currently planning, and I know WellSprings that we are all busy and we are all tired, but I know we also are working to build a beloved community to recharge our souls. And so whether you can participate in the march or not, I hope you will join me and Suzanne Havens Lang in the monthly work of the IAC, and in no mean that we together have work in this moment in our hands to be the neighbors our neighbors need. Maybe so.

**[00:26:17] Speaker3**

Well, Shalom and my name is Rabbi John Cutler from Beth Israel Congregation, not too far from where WellSprings is. And it's an honor to be talking to you this morning. Beth asked me to speak about March that is taking place this coming spring, possibly the first week, the first Saturday in May, but it hasn't been solidified yet. And the purpose of this march is threefold. First is what's happening within our schools at the present time where there's pushback on the around diversity, equity and inclusion that we, as an interfaith community, the interfaith action community, want to bring awareness to the general community of Chester County, specifically Downingtown and the other school districts, the need to support diversity, equity and inclusion curriculum within the school system. The second purpose and the poverty, the march, I should say, and having the march will be awareness physically that people will see us out there marching for these issues of the DCI to ensure that they are part of the school system and the curriculum. The second part of the second purpose of our march is to bring together a diverse community to show that we rephrase this to say that we are a counter-narrative to the voice out there. The dominant voice out there is the far right who does not want to do in the school and is fighting that, but to let people know that we as the IAC are creating a different narrative of that.

**[00:28:16] Speaker3**

Various faith groups coming together to support DEI and showing that we are cooperating with each other as various faith groups to ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion are not only included but become part and parcel of the culture of the schools. And then the third piece is out of this March that to hopefully to have a groundswell of grassroots activism where people will come together and say, What is our next step and how do we organize? And the purpose of the organization would be to elect officials on the school board that would reflect our views, and no other purpose would also to come together to have discussions and conversations, even with people on the far right and to broaden that beyond just our own group. And another purpose to with the result is is to bring together various faith groups to make change and to support. I mean, I should say, to support the school board in Downingtown and Onge Roberts at the present time to say that you do have support from a different group than just, let's say, extremists on the far right. So I hope that you'll come out and support our march. That and the information will be coming forth.

**[00:29:55] Speaker1**

Wellsprings, will you join me, please, in the spirit of prayer? Spirit of life and love God of many names and no names. We come today with weary hearts, with bodies that are tired from a week and a year and two years of uncertainty and grief. But we come also in humility and gratitude for the people in this community, this WellSprings community that gathers to charge our souls each week to be able to go out and do the work of being good neighbors. And we are grateful for the good neighbors in this community who share our values and work with us, whether we know it or not, to build a beloved community. May that knowledge that we are not alone, that we are part of faithful neighbors, uplift us and sustain us and hold us until we can gather again. May it be so. And Amen.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



