

RELIGION

Mather, Harges share stories of abundant, blessed friendship

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EDITOR

The friendship between De'Amon Harges and the Rev. Michael Mather is based on some basic principles.

Paying attention, deeply, to one another. Being present. Living life abundantly. Sharing. Mutuality.

“What we hope is that you think about friendships outside of this space, outside of Chautauqua, thinking about how important and blessed we are,” Harges told the audience Tuesday at the Hall of Philosophy.

Harges was one-half of Tuesday’s presentation of the Interfaith Lecture Series’ Week One theme of “Holy Friendship: Source of Strength and Challenge.” Mather, the other half.

There is a loneliness epidemic in America; it impacts health, economic status, “everything in our world,” Harges said. When Harges and Mather met in 2000, their work on making the world a little bit less lonely began.

Currently, Harges is a social banker and community organizer, and creator of The Learning Tree; Mather is pastor of the First United Church of Boulder. But in 2000, Mather was pastor at Broadway UMC in South Bend, where Harges was working at a rehabilitation center. Mather was just back from a sabbatical, and both men had friends and acquaintances who kept mentioning to both that “you need to meet this guy.”

“It took us a little while to meet,” Harges said. “Some people connected us together and thought we would be good matches. ... I remember meeting Mike. I did not believe this dude was a pastor.”

As Mather and Harges got to know each other, Mather asked Harges, “Tell me your story.” No one, in any church or social service agency, had ever asked Harges that.

Harges’ story was one of growing up in hostile places while “living life abundantly.” His grandfather would quote John 10:10 – “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” On the day Harges’ mother was born, his grandfather planted a tree.

“That tree grew across the years and the community would gather around that tree, whenever there was a crisis or something that needed to be worked out in the community,” Mather said. “They ended up calling that tree the learning tree” – now the name of the association Harges founded that specializes



JESS KSZOS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Rev. Michael Mather, pastor of First United Church in Boulder, and De'Amon Harges, creator of The Learning Tree in Indianapolis, speak about their friendship and the power that abundance and mutuality can have in restoring communities during their conversation for the Interfaith Lecture Series Tuesday in the Hall of Philosophy.

in Asset Based Community Development.

The point, Harges said, was that Mather’s “eyes lit up with delight.” Harges felt seen, paid attention to.

They started kickin’ it, Harges said, and several years later Mather convinced – or kidnapped, depending on who you ask – Harges to come to church. He’s still a layperson at Broadway UMC.

They experienced a lot together. Harges started a family; they grew close with Mather’s family. They looked out for each other, spent time together. They developed a holy friendship.

“There are places that are real and rooted in complexity. They’re rooted in truth. They’re rooted in community,” Harges said. “We talk about the world ‘community,’ and part of that is about sharing our burdens. And we often did that together.”

When Mather was transferred to another Broadway UMC – this time in Indianapolis – Harges would regale him with stories from the old neighborhood and the church community the two men helped to flourish. It highlights the importance of community rituals, practices – things that are “really important for how we think about friendship and how it lives itself out in the world,” Mather said.

Rituals and practices were key in the South Bend Broadway UMC. When the local development council called Mather asking to partner with Broadway UMC on a neighborhood strategic plan, the pastor gave them three stipulations.

“Remember what De'Amon said at the beginning, that the three things that are cornerstones to us in our friendship: observation and mutuality and abundance,” Mather said. “... (We told the council) if you are doing a strategic plan based on the needs of the community, we will only do it if you do it by collecting the abundance of the community – by finding out the gifts of every person who lives in this community, finding out what they care about, and what they have to offer to that (goal).”

The second stipulation was for Broadway to pick the person who led that work. The third stipulation was that the church would supervise that person.

“The supervision was just a ploy,” joked Harges, who, of course, was the person the church appointed as its “roving listener.” It was a natural fit, Mather said.

“You’re always seeing and noticing the abundance around; you’re always seeing and noticing what’s richly around us,” Mather said. “In this place where everybody else only sees want, and poor, and need, you see something else.”

Harges’ job description was to “find the gifts of every person in the life of that community and find the place for that gift.”

So he walked, and he listened, and he found and lifted up the gifts of his neighbors to “build community economy and mutual delight.” The church, and the neighborhood, were transformed.

The two men recounted all that came from those



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Founder,
The Learning Tree

roving listening sessions – speaking engagements, consultant gigs, a professional development firm. But at the grassroots, community level is the work Mather calls “making the invisible, visible.”

Harges and Mather closed with a poem by their

friend, Mari Evans. It’s titled “Celebration,” and they quoted from it at the top of their conversation. At the end, Harges and Mather recited more, but asked Chautauquans to participate in the poem’s closing lines:

“I will be bringing you

someone whole
and you will be bringing
me someone whole
and we be twice as
strong
and we be twice as true
and we will have twice as
much
of love
and everything.”

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