

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# We are called to move beyond 'cynical' tolerance



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Krista Tippett never interviews politicians but made an exception a couple of weeks ago. Cory Booker, the Democratic senator from New Jersey, was the exception because she was intrigued with his reference to politics as the work of “manifesting love.”

Tippett is the host of “On Being,” a radio interview show that deals with religious and spiritual topics. She introduced Booker as a Stanford University graduate, Rhodes Scholar to Oxford, law degree recipient from Yale University, former mayor of Newark, N.J., and now senator. But Tippett expressed surprise when she heard him say that the best thing that ever happened to him was “being broken, time and time again.”

Booker told about his experience meeting Virginia Jones, an organizer for the tenants in a building where he lived in Newark and where Jones’ son had been killed. She asked him to describe the neighborhood, and Booker responded with comments about the drug dealing and abandoned buildings. Jones faced him and bluntly said, “Boy, you need to understand that the world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you, and if you’re one of those people who only sees darkness, despair, that’s all there’s ever going to be. But if you see hope, opportunity, if you’re stubborn enough to, every time you open your eyes, see love and the face of God, then you can be a change agent here. Then you can make a difference.”

Booker relates that this was a monumental moment for him; it was the realization that he had to make choices. “Your life is not just stimulus-response. That space between stimulus and response — you can make powerful choices. And even in the way you describe a person, describe a child. ... I could go through all the maladies and describe the children as a collection of those — or I can see their divinity and see their potential.”

He recognizes the important effect that his parents had on him while growing up with bigotry, conflict and hatred all around them. They were the only black family in their town and faced discrimination and hatred. They would drive into Newark in order to attend a small black church. His parents made sure that he and his brother received a good education. They also taught him about confronting fear, which is “often the ignition point for bigotry or hatred or conflict.”

“I was very fortunate to have a life that was very different than my parents. My dad would tell me, ‘Boy, don’t walk around this house like you hit a triple. You were born on third base.’” His mother would tell him, “Cory, think about what you would do, if you knew you couldn’t fail despite your fears and insecurities.” This inspired him to move into the depressed and dangerous area of Newark and work to improve conditions for the residents. His father admonished, “You can’t pay back all the blessings that were given to you in gen-

erations before, but you’ve got to pay it forward.”

“My parents had this view of this sort of indefatigable love — love of people, love of this country — that was really shaping, to me, about how you encounter darkness, and what do you do? How when you encounter discouragement or defeat, what do you do? And those are building blocks ... that are so fundamental to my own personal philosophy and my orienting to the world, to the universe and to religion.”

Booker worries that we are coming to a place where we can’t see the humanity in someone else. As we demonize those different from ourselves, there will be no way that we can work together to find common ground. He fears that our country “will be torn left or right and forget about the urgency of forward progress.” He sums it up with: “It is so easy to love people who agree with you, but the real test comes, to love someone who you disagree with.”

When he talks of love, he means the kind of love that inspired the soldiers who stormed beaches in Normandy. “It’s the hard love. It’s the difficult love. It’s not an easy way. It’s hurtful. Love does get angry. And this is a time where our country needs a more courageous love, needs a more daring empathy. This is really a moment where we’re going to define our culture.” What we need now, he says, is an “understanding that these are sacred spaces between us, and they need to be fueled and injected with an unapologetic, courageous, daring love.”

This kind of love is also far from mere tolerance. He sees tolerance as “a cynical state of mind — we’re just going to stomach each other’s right to be different. And basically, tolerance says that if you disappear from the face of this earth, I’m no better or worse off, because I was just tolerating you like I tolerate a cold. ... But love says, ‘I see your worth. I see your value.’”

Looking for someone to solve all of our problems takes away our individual responsibility. “It forgets those cute little, 10 two-letter words that I learned as a child, which are simply, ‘If it is to be, it is up to me.’” He reminds us that “change rarely comes from Washington, it comes to Washington.”

He quotes Mother Teresa’s response to the journalist who asked how she measures success. Her answer was, “I wasn’t called to be successful. I was called to be faithful.” For Booker, faithfulness is not just a spiritual issue. It’s getting up and continuing to work, “even if you can’t see to how that work will change this almost seemingly impossible reality.”

Yes, we are not called to be successful, or to just be tolerant. We are called to be faithful with a love and respect that can, in fact, change reality.

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