

WHAT DID YOUR MOTHER TEACH YOU?

(05/14/17)

Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 31:10-31

Mark 3:1-5

“He was grieved at their hardness of heart.” (Mark 3:3)

Just a few weeks ago I attended a conference that explored modern currents in psychoanalytic thought from a Jungian perspective. The topic of the conference was “Dissociation: Trauma and the Disturbance of the Self.” It was an excellent conference! I learned a lot about different theories of trauma and about how therapists in our country and around the world are working with traumatized people, with traumatized populations.

Jungian psychology is grounded in the belief that healing, both physical and psychological, comes from within. I find this perspective congruent with my religious beliefs, which is probably why I was attracted to Jungian psychology many years ago. Modern Jungians also believe that a central aspect of healing, specifically the healing of trauma, comes through or is facilitated by the patient’s relationship with the therapist.

One way of understanding what happens in psychotherapy is that both the psychotherapist and the patient are contained within an energy field that is shaped by a transcendent force or presence that is both inside them and outside them. During the course of a Jungian analysis, which parallels the alchemical process of the transformation of the *prima materia*, the basic stuff of life, to gold, both of the persons are changed.

Some of the presentations reminded me of Carl Rogers, one of the giants of humanistic psychology. Rogers believes that the therapist must genuinely feel and also communicate unconditional positive regard for the patient, for the patient is often unable to regard him/herself in this way. Rogers reminds us that therapy, which is grounded in empathy and compassion, is much more than the impersonal application of a technique.

The patient intuitively knows whether the therapist is empathically attuned to him/her, just as an infant or child knows whether the mother or the father is empathically attuned to him/her. At a previous conference we were able to watch some videos of mothers who were empathically attuned to their infant, who were responsive to the infant’s attempts at communication and who were able to help the infant with emotional regulation, and other mothers who weren’t. The difference was startling.

Several of the presentations at the recent conference touched on the issue of whether you can teach empathy and compassion or whether they arise as a result of life experiences. One presenter suggested that there may be a window of opportunity for internalizing these traits, and that when this window closes it will never open again. I suspect this may be true.

How do we learn empathy? How do we learn what it means to see into another person, to be aware of how that person feels and how that person views the world? How do we learn compassion? What leads us to care about what the other is feeling and experiencing? All I know is that many people don't seem to have this capacity.

It is not unusual in a marriage for both partners to see the problems from their perspective and from that perspective alone. Because they lack the capacity for social perspective taking, it is difficult for them to experience empathy for their partner. This leads them to engage in what the Buddhists have identified as a major cause of suffering: grasping. They hold tightly to their point of view, to their perspective, to their hurt feelings, to their understanding of the marital problems, and they won't let go. Believe me, this causes tremendous suffering for both of the partners in the marriage.

Many years ago I attended a conference that addressed the question of whether empathy is inherent, inborn in all people. I personally believe it is at least a latent potentiality within each of us. However, because of our life experiences, particularly the experiences of early childhood, it may become an integral part of who we are or it may remain latent throughout our life. We all know people whose hearts are hardened, who are strangely untouched by something that would bring most of us to tears. These people "just don't seem to get it."

During that conference the speaker showed us a video. In the video, a little three-year-old boy was seated on the floor across from a little three-year-old girl. The little girl was playing with a toy. The little boy wanted the toy, so he reached across and took it from the little girl. The little girl pouted, as only little girls can do. Her eyes filled with tears. The little boy looked puzzled. He looked across at his playmate. He looked at the toy he had taken. Then he looked back at his playmate with a quizzical look on his face.

Suddenly he "got it." He realized that his playmate was sad because he had taken her toy. He gently placed the toy in front of her. When the little girl saw the toy in front

of her, she started to smile. In a moment her tears were gone; both were smiling and happy.

This little boy, who was only three years old, had learned a valuable lesson about life. He had learned a lesson about social perspective taking, about viewing life events from perspectives other than his own. He had learned a lesson about empathy, about being aware of how another person feels from the inside. He had also learned a lesson about compassion. He actually cared about how his little playmate felt. He cared whether she was happy or not. For some strange reason this was more important to him than the pleasure he would derive from playing with the coveted toy.

Why was he able to do this while other children his age could have cared less how the little girl felt? Not only was he able to see his actions from a perspective other than his own, not only was he able to understand how his friend felt when he took her toy, he actually cared about her feelings. He cared about her happiness.

Why did he care? At that age, children are supposed to be egocentric. They are supposed to be governed by the pleasure principle: all actions are designed to increase *their* pleasure and decrease *their* pain. In sharing he gave away the coveted toy. But he made his little friend happy. And that made him happy. And I think this is what life is all about!

I have just begun reading the recently published account of conversations between the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu entitled *The Book of Joy*. In it the Dalai Lama tells us that all people seek happiness. He tells us that choosing and then pursuing our egocentric happiness, however, is a path that gives rise to suffering in others and also in ourselves. He tells us that when we break down the artificial barriers that separate us from each other, when we experience that great interconnectedness that Buddhists describe as nirvana and Christians describe as the kingdom of heaven, we will experience peace within ourselves and establish a reign of peace and justice upon the earth.

Going back to the little boy, I am still curious. How did he develop the capacity to relate to his little friend on such a deep level? What experiences or relationships in his childhood enabled him to develop a capacity for empathy and compassion that was beyond the comprehension as well as the experience of most of his playmates?

From listening to what certain political figures say and from observing their actions, it would seem that the capacity for empathy and compassion remains dormant in many adults. With far too many of us, both in our country and around the world, the capacity for empathy and compassion, and hence the capacity for genuine love, remains *in potentia*. Some people live their whole lives without experiencing it. I think these people have missed an important dimension of life.

Take our little church as an example. What makes us care whether a little Tibetan refugee girl in India receives an education in her cultural and religious heritage? What makes us care about people in Worcester County who go to bed hungry? What makes us care about homeless women and their children who need a shelter, a safe place? What makes us care about transgendered people who desperately need to fit in, to be accepted for who they are? What makes us care about women who have been raped, who have been traumatized both physically and psychologically? What makes us care about people in Haiti and Africa who are poor beyond our level of comprehension?

And yet we care. We not only care, we give. Now comes the question that has me puzzled. Do we give because we are Christians? Do we give because Jesus tells us to give and because he gave us an example in his life of what it means to give one's life freely for others? Do we care because he cared so deeply about the blind, the deaf, and the lepers that he healed? Or is it because we are caring people that his teachings and the teachings of the Dalai Lama make sense to us? In other words, are we caring people because we are Christian, or are we drawn to Christianity because we are caring people?

Think of someone who was a role model in your life, who was a formative influence on your personal and emotional development. I have a hunch that many of us would think of our mother in this way.

If we developed the capacity for empathy and for compassion, which all of us have or we wouldn't be here this morning, I suspect many of us learned it from our mothers. Some of us also learned it from our fathers. We learned it from their words, from what they taught us. We may have also learned it from their example.

When my mother baked a casserole for a neighbor who was going through a difficult time because "she shouldn't have to think about cooking a meal for herself and her children at a time like this," I learned something about empathy and about

compassion. I also learned about it when my father and I mowed the lawn and shoveled the driveway of an elderly widow in our neighborhood because, in my father's words, "she has better things to do with her money than hire someone to do this."

I believe the capacity for empathy, for compassion, and hence for love is inborn, inherent, innate. I say "and hence for love" because I believe love rests on a foundation of empathy and compassion. I can't imagine that someone could love if he/she were unable to feel empathy or compassion. It would be a strange kind of love.

I agree with the Dalai Lama: this kind of empathy, compassion, and love is necessary for our survival as human beings. If we only care for ourselves, we will increase suffering in the world, and we will also increase suffering in ourselves. We need to grasp on a very deep level that we are all in this together. We need to break down the artificial barriers that divide us, the barriers of race, sex, nationality, and religion.

This is what Jesus taught us. He taught us that the barrier between Jew and Gentile, between Jew and Samaritan caused suffering. He reached out to those who were regarded by his society as untouchables. By his caring, he taught us to care. By doing what he did to alleviate suffering in the world, he challenged us to do what we can.

By the way, as we noted this morning in our adult Bible study, Jesus is often described as experiencing pity or being filled with compassion. We also noted, in relation to our gospel reading this morning, that Jesus was never angry with tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals or social outcasts. He was angry at hypocrites, at the Pharisees, at those religious leaders who had no empathy, who had no compassion for those who were suffering. There is a lesson here for us.

I wonder where Jesus learned to care. I suspect that he learned it from his mother and maybe also from his father. We don't know for sure. We know little about Mary, but I have my suspicions. I suspect that the inborn, innate potential for deep caring and compassion within the little boy Jesus was brought into consciousness and nurtured by the teaching and the loving example of his mother. I know that many people who have a deep relationship with Mary experience her this way. I would also note that many of the mystics in the history of the Roman Catholic tradition had a special devotion to Mary.

This morning, on Mother's Day, think about your mother. Think about what she taught you both by her words and by her example. Think about little examples of caring

that she showed forth in her interactions with others, in her relationships with family members and others. Then think about why you care, why you give, why you are a Christian and a member of this church. I think you will find there is a connection.

Let us celebrate and consecrate that connection today on Mother's Day.

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