

WHY DO YOU CARE?

(05/13/18)

Scripture Lesson: Proverbs 31:10-31

*“She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.”* (Prov. 31:20)

With regard to the passage we just heard from this morning’s scripture lesson, the description of the capable wife/mother/woman, I have a question. It says that she “opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” Why does she do this? Why does she, a woman who appears to be of means, care about the poor and the needy? And why does she reach out her hands to them?

I have recently been watching a series on television entitled *The Alienist*. It only lasted about eight segments, but I hope it will be resurrected in the future.

I was struck by the title. I knew that late nineteenth century psychiatrists, before they were called psychiatrists, were referred to as alienists. However, I never knew why.

Now I know. In the late eighteen-hundreds, people who suffered from mental illness were thought to be alienated from their true nature. The persons who studied them and tried to help them were called alienists. I absolutely love it!

I totally agree that people who are suffering from a mental or emotional disorder are essentially alienated from their true nature. Their life has been pulled off center, so to speak. They are unable to live out of their authentic self. The various psychic and somatic symptoms they experience are not only expressions of this alienation; they are a call to return to the center. When this happens the symptoms dissolve.

This perspective or way of thinking is congruent with the three branches of psychology that I found most helpful in my development as a pastor, as a pastoral counselor, and as a psychoanalyst: humanistic psychology, existential psychology, and depth psychology. It is also the basic perspective of Christianity. The Greek word that is translated as “sin” in the New Testament means “missing the mark.” This is why sin can be described as an alienation: the state of being alienated from our brothers and sisters, from the deepest parts of ourselves, and from that God who is the source of all life.

This is why I just love this metaphor of alienation, and I am happy to think of myself, whether as a pastor or a psychotherapist, as an alienist!

Jesus tells us what it means to be our true self, to be the person that God calls us to be. He tells us that we will love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and that we will love our neighbor. He tells us we will minister to the stranger in need just as the Good Samaritan did. He tells us we will look for opportunities to serve. He tells us our life will be filled with the joy that comes to those who dwell within the kingdom of God. He tells us we will experience the peace that passes all understanding.

The apostle Paul tells us what it means to be our true self. He tells us that our life will be filled with a deep and mature love. He tells us we will be patient and kind, not envious or arrogant or boastful. He tells us we will not insist on getting our own way, that we will not be irritable or resentful when life or other people fail to meet our egocentric expectations. Like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Paul tells us that this love will connect us with God, will bring us into God's presence.

Francis of Assisi tells us what it means to be our true self and how this will find expression in our actions, in what we bring to and share with the world. He prays,

*Lord make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine master grant that I may
not so much seek to be consoled as to console
to be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love
For it is in giving that we receive
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

This is the total opposite of egocentric narcissism! When we are alienated from our true self, we cannot or will not do this. The solution for this alienation is simply to return to the center, to return to the Source.

This morning, on Mother's Day, I want to highlight one personality characteristic of the protagonist of the television series. The alienist showed a high degree of scientific curiosity regarding the psychological profile of the man who murdered and mutilated

several little boys; he wanted to understand why he did what he did. However, he also had empathy for the murderer. At the end, he confessed to his colleagues that he thought they were looking for a monster, but what they found was a wounded child.

I believe that an essential part of our human nature is the ability to feel and express this kind of empathy.

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

It is not unusual in a marriage or any relationship for both people to see the problems from their own perspective and from that perspective alone. They lack the capacity for social perspective taking, for both empathy and compassion. 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, and they won't let go. This causes tremendous suffering--for both persons.

I once attended a conference on empathy where the issue was raised of whether empathy is inherent, inborn in all people. I believe it is. I believe it is 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 our life or it may remain latent, an unrealized potential throughout our life. We all know people who are just hardened, whose hearts are strangely untouched by something that would bring most of us to tears. These people "just don't seem to get it."

During the conference the speaker showed us a video. In the video, a little three-year-old boy was seated 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 back in front of her. When the girl saw the toy, she started to smile. In a moment the tears were gone and both of them were happy.

This little boy, who was only three years old, had somehow 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 because 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? Why was he able to do it while other children his age couldn't have cared less how the little girl felt? Not only was the little boy 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 just think about themselves. They are supposed to be governed by what Freud called the pleasure principle; all actions are designed to increase *their* pleasure and decrease *their* pain. By sharing, he gave away the coveted toy. But he made his little friend happy. And that made him happy!

The Dalai Lama tells us that all people seek happiness. He also tells us that a surefire way to experience suffering in our own lives and increase the suffering that others experience is to be concerned with *only* our own happiness. He tells us that we need to break down the artificial barriers that separate us from each other. When we can do this, 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 we will be able to share this deep inner peace with others.

I am still curious. How did this little boy 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 beyond the comprehension as well as the experience of most of his classmates?

I would note, from watching and reading the news, that the capacity for empathy and compassion apparently remains dormant in many adults. With far too many, 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 they 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 to live? What makes us care about women who have been raped, who have been traumatized not only physically but also 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! However, I am still puzzled. Do we give because we are Christians? Do we give because Jesus tells us to give and because he gave us an example of what it means to give one's life for others? Do we care because he cared so deeply about the blind, the deaf, the crippled, and the lepers that he healed? Or is it because we are caring people that Jesus' teachings, Paul's teachings, St. Francis's 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, because the core teachings of Christianity find a deep resonance within us?

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 may have learned it from their words, from what they taught us. It is more likely that we 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 her family 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 who, in my father's words, "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!

This is what Jesus taught us. He taught us that the barrier between Jew and Gentile 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.

I wonder where Jesus learned to care. I suspect that he learned it from his mother and also from his father. We don't know for sure. We know little about Mary, the mother of Jesus. And yet I have my suspicions. I suspect that the inborn, inherent, 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.

This morning, on Mother's Day, think about your own mother. Think about what she taught you both by her words and by her example. Think about little incidents, little examples of caring and compassion that found expression in her interactions with others, in her relationships with family members, even with people who were difficult. Then think about how you feel today, why you care, why you give to missions, why you are a Christian, why you are 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!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
May 13, 2018*