

HOW BIG IS YOUR WORLD?

(07/14/19)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:25-37

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36-37)

I recently read an article about a man named Rafael Hernandez. Rafael Hernandez is just an ordinary, everyday type of person. He emigrated to this country from Mexico several years ago, and he lives with his wife and three children in a modest dwelling in a relatively poor section of New Mexico. He works at a traditional blue-collar job. He and his family go to church every Sunday.

On this particular day, Mr. Hernandez was taking his early morning walk in another part of town. As he passed a house, he noticed flames visible through an upstairs window. Without a thought, he ran up to the front door, kicked it in, and raced upstairs. There he found the mother, the father, and two little children unconscious from the smoke. He carried each of them, including the father, who weighed more than he did, through the fire, down the stairs, and out into the front yard. There he administered CPR until the fire trucks and ambulance arrived. When he saw they were safe, he walked away, not leaving his name.

Later that day, a local newspaper reporter managed to track down the man who had performed such a heroic act. When asked why he risked his life by entering a burning building to save people he didn't even know, Mr. Hernandez replied, “I couldn't have lived with myself unless I did all I could do to save those people.”

Life is precious. There is not much that is worth more than life. To be sure, there are certain basic values like freedom that people will fight and die for. Most of us would fight and even die rather than be enslaved and have those we love enslaved by our government or a foreign government. But why would people risk their lives for other people's freedom, for the freedom of people in a far-off country, as our young men and women have done in several wars? Most of us would give our life for someone we love. But why would people risk their lives for people whom they don't even know?

Assumption College, where I used to teach, recently invited students to a faculty debate. The theme of the debate was “Why should we care about other people?” This struck me as an

interesting debate, and a worthy theme for college students to consider. As I thought about the debate, I had a sense of how it might go.

One faculty person will probably argue for enlightened self-interest, which is a fancy name for selfishness. He/she might make the point that the best way for our society not only to survive but to thrive is for all of us to look out for ourselves, to practice a kind of social Darwinism that ensures the survival of the fittest. If the weak die off, the human race will become stronger, eventually producing a higher standard of living for all. It is not only in *my* best interest; it is *for the good of society* that I “look out for #1.”

I wonder how the other faculty member will frame his/her side of the debate, what points he/she will make to counter the argument for social Darwinism or Ayn Rand’s rational and ethical realism, with its denial of altruism. How could this faculty person convince college students who are just setting forth in life that they should care about other people? I wonder whether this debater will invoke Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan in making his/her point. After all, Assumption College is, or is supposed to be, a religious institution.

In attempting to answer the question: “Why should you care about other people?” we might think about it in terms of what the German existentialist philosophers called the *Umwelt*. According to Martin Heidegger, the *Umwelt*, the *Welt*, the world into which we are thrown, is basically the world in which we live. It is the world that surrounds us, that engages us.

For example, if an ant wandered into the Monet gallery of the Museum of Fine Arts, the ant would be totally focused on finding crumbs. A cat in the same room would probably focus on finding a spot in the sun or an inviting lap where it could curl up and take a nap. This would be their *Umwelt*. A museum guard would be focused on keeping people from touching the paintings. An art historian would be drawn to the paintings themselves, noting the techniques that Monet employed and how they illustrate the period of French Impressionism that Monet founded. He/she might also reflect on how the subtle muted tones of Monet’s paintings are probably attributable to Monet’s untreated cataracts. He painted what he saw.

It seems evident that the art historian lives in a bigger world than the ant. Jesus, especially in parables like the Good Samaritan, challenges us to live in a bigger world than ourselves and our own basic needs--a world that involves other people. He tells us it is more blessed to give than to receive. He tells us that empathy, compassion, caring, friendship, and

love make our world bigger—especially love. The concept of having a bigger *Umwelt* helps us to understand Mr. Hernandez’s decision to endanger his life by entering a burning building; what it means that he felt *called*, he felt *impelled* to help someone in need: these people were part of his world. It helps us understand what Mr. Hernandez meant when he said, “I couldn’t have lived with myself unless I had done all I could to save those people.” What would he have lost if he had walked away or if he had chosen the safer route of calling 911? His soul? Why did he risk his life for someone he didn’t even know—and then simply walk away, eschewing all recognition of his heroic act?

An embryo, a fetus, an infant, a little child lives only for him/herself. There is no sense of separate people, no sense that the mother is a separate being with her own needs. Little children feel the world revolves around them. This is a healthy narcissism, and it’s cute—at least when we’re talking about infants and children. Gradually children come to realize that they will have to delay gratification, that they will have to negotiate or compromise their needs in relation to the needs of their mother. Only much later do they come to genuinely care about their mother and her needs. Some children, sadly, never reach this stage.

Narcissistic adults care only about themselves. They believe the world revolves around them. They have a limited capacity for empathy. They cannot feel what another person feels, can’t realize what it would feel like to be that other person. Because narcissistic people can’t feel genuine empathy, they really don’t care about other people. Other people are seen as a means to an end, the source of their own happiness or the gratification of their needs. Because narcissistic people can’t feel genuine empathy, they can’t love. This is because empathy and genuine caring are at the heart of love.

The mark of moral development, of moral maturity, is the size of our world. The more people we care about, the more people for whom we have empathy and love, the higher our level of moral development. Narcissistic people are on one end of the spectrum, for in the last analysis they care only about themselves. Then come the people who care only about their family and their closest relatives. Then come people who care only about people who are like them—either the same religion, the same color, the same sexual orientation, or the same socioeconomic status.

On the other end of the spectrum are people like Jesus, like the Buddha, like Mahatma Gandhi, like Francis of Assisi, like Albert Schweitzer, like Mother Theresa. With these spiritual

giants, *no one* is outside the realm of their love and care! They embody and radiate empathy and love for *all*. This is because they realize we are all related, all connected with each other on the deepest level as children of God. It is because they know that, on the deepest level, *we are all God*.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges our individual, cultural, and religious narcissism. He challenges us to expand our world, to make our world a little bigger. He reminded his people, the Jews, that on the deepest level, Jews and Samaritans are not only neighbors; they are one. He reminds us that on the deepest level, we are all one.

I remember reading the works of the German philosopher Friedrich Schopenhauer when I studied philosophy many years ago. Schopenhauer noted that mothers, even in the animal kingdom, will give their lives for their children. He noted that people seem to genuinely care about others, even those they do not know. He noted that people are capable of acts of great heroism, that some people will even risk their life for a stranger. Schopenhauer explained this by suggesting that on a deep metaphysical level, we are all connected. On the deepest metaphysical level, *we are all one*. Because deep down we know this, because in our best moments we are all aware of this level, we find ourselves spontaneously caring for others in need.

This is what I find so interesting about the developments in quantum physics in this century. The quantum physicists have actually *proven* that there is a deep level which connects us all, a level that the quantum physicist David Bohm calls the implicate order. I believe that this level or energy field explains the healing power of intercessory prayer. When we join our hearts and our minds in prayer, we create an energetic connection or we tap into an energetic connection that transcends space and time. When we pray for another person, e.g., someone whose name is on our prayer list, our caring, our concern *actually connects* with that person. Our individual prayer, if it is deep and sincere, actually makes a difference. Just think, if we *all* join in prayer, who knows the strength of the healing power that would be unleashed!

This is what Jesus tells us in our scripture lesson this morning. Jesus tells us that our world is bigger than we think—or *it should be*. Jesus calls us to feel and then affirm our connection with our brothers and sisters. Jesus calls us to recognize that we are connected with those who seem different, that since they are a part of God, they are a part of us. He calls us to have empathy for those of different color, different ethnic backgrounds, different socioeconomic

status, different religious beliefs, and different sexual orientation or gender identity. Jesus is calling us to expand our world, to make our world so big that it doesn't exclude anyone!

This morning, during our worship service, we had a time of celebration. We celebrated two very special people, Bud and Martha Hubley, who are celebrating their 68th wedding anniversary, and what they have meant to their family, to our church, to our community and beyond. I think Bud and Martha, each in their own way, are examples of what it means to live in a bigger world.

By the way, I just want to say that evangelists or missionaries that go to other countries or who go door-to-door to try to convert you to their religion, might think they are living in a bigger world. I don't see it this way. If I go to India, Nepal, and Tibet to try to convert the Hindus and Buddhists to Christianity (actually to become liberal Protestant Christians—certainly not to become Roman Catholics or Southern Baptists), I am actually trying to make the world smaller. I am trying to make these people exactly like me so I can like them. I am saying to these people that if they become *just like me*, if they believe *exactly* what I believe, we can have a relationship, we can share in a particular community. If they don't convert to my way of thinking, I will “shake the dust from my sandals and move on.” I don't think you can create a smaller world than that!

I think about the students at the college where I taught for twenty-five years, the students who are the future of our country and the world. How will they decide whether to care about other people or think only of themselves? Will they decide based on which faculty member argues more eloquently in a debate? Or is the die already cast? What did they have for role models? Did they learn to care from their parents? How big was their parents' world? What did they learn and observe when they went to church? Did they see a church that reached out to the world in mission and fellowship, or were they members of a church whose vision reached no further than its own members and its own financial survival?

Think of the missions we support as a church: the Tibet Fund, through which we sponsor a child who lives in a Tibetan refugee community in India; the Pastoral Counseling Centers of Massachusetts; Abby's House in Worcester, which provides women and their children with a safe place to live; the Worcester County Food Bank; Church World Service; Heifer International; His Royal Ministry in Haiti; Pathways for Change (formerly the Rape Crisis Center of Central

Massachusetts); Straight Ahead Ministries; World Vision; the Salvation Army; the Stop Girl Trafficking Project of the American Himalayan Foundation in Nepal; and the United Parishes of Southborough Food Pantry. Every gift that we give to these missions, when accompanied by our care and concern, make our world a little bigger.

Some people may think this is too much mission. I think not. A sense of mission, which is built into the fabric of our existence, is what makes us a Christian church. No other religion gives as much to mission, to those outside as well as inside their faith, as we Christians do. Our sense of mission calls us to live in a big world. Our commitment to mission is built on the deep spiritual awareness that on the most fundamental level, we are all one, we are all children of God, and we cannot live with ourselves if we turn our backs on those in need.

Mr. Hernandez may not know very much about quantum mechanics. He may have never heard of Friedrich Schopenhauer or the existentialist philosophers. He may not have read some of the recent scientific studies on the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Because he is a Christian, however, he probably has heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Even if he hasn't, through his actions Mr. Hernandez shows that he has grasped the deeper meaning of Jesus' message in this parable. Mr. Hernandez knows instinctively or intuitively that on a very deep level we are all connected. He knows that we are all neighbors.

Even though he lives in a little town in New Mexico, Mr. Hernandez lives in a very big world.

“Go, now, and do likewise.”

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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