

“Whatever Happened To Altruism?”

Altruism is a regard for others, both natural and moral; devotion to the interests of others; brotherly kindness; the quality of unselfish concern for the welfare of others; opposed to egoism or selfishness. A long list of forty plus synonyms like *almsgiving, benevolent, bighearted, charitable, generous, good, goodwill, greathearted, humane, humanitarian, kind, large-hearted, self denial* all speak about the brightest and best of our humanity (Dictionary.net from Webster 1913 and Collaborative Dictionary of English v. O.48);

In *The Lion and Mouse*, Aesop told one of the most beloved stories about our innate spirit of compassion and our natural inclination towards doing kindness which is found in both the big and small. One day a great lion lay asleep in the sunshine. A little mouse ran across his paw and wakened him. The great lion was just going to eat him up when the little mouse cried, "Oh, please, let me go, sir. Someday I may help you." The lion laughed at the thought that the little mouse could be of any use to him. But he was a good-natured lion, and he set the mouse free. Not long after, the lion was caught in a net. He tugged and pulled with all his might, but the ropes were too strong. Then he roared loudly. The little mouse heard him, and ran to the spot. "Be still, dear Lion, and I will set you free. I will gnaw the ropes." With his sharp little teeth, the mouse cut the ropes, and the lion came out of the net. "You laughed at me once," said the mouse. "You thought I was too little to do you a good turn. But see, you owe your life to a poor little mouse."

Recently on TV I heard about a study that questioned our natural inclination towards altruism. Last year, Harvard students conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of social networking through the internet for solving a common problem. The study was simple. Balloons were hidden in specific locations across the country. The task was to find them. The results were astonishing. It took only six hours after the game data was published on the internet for

participants to find the balloons. When the researchers were asked why participants were able to solve this common problem so quickly they responded: Greed. Reward money was given to those who found the balloons. "What's in it for me?" was the common deal maker question that they had asked. The good news in the study is that greed motivated a huge number of people to join together to quickly solve the same problem. The bad news is that greed as the uniting dynamic among the problem solvers suggests an inclination towards reliance on the darker side of our humanity.

The researcher's answer of greed stopped me in my tracks with the question: Is American society losing our moral devotion to the well being of others? Truth be told, the quality of altruism gets a low score on psychological tests. Taken together, the studies caused me to wonder if our natural inclination toward altruism needs some kind of *tweaking* in order for our moral altruism to come into full bloom. In *The Book on Virtues*, author William Bennett seems to have been wondering about the same thing when he suggested that what natural altruism needs is moral education. *Moral education*, he wrote, ---*the training of heart and mind toward the good---involves many things. It involves rules and precepts---the do's and don'ts of life with others---as well as explicit instruction, exhortation, and training. Moral education must provide training in good habits. . . And moral education must affirm the central importance of moral example. It has been said that there is nothing more influential, more determinant, in a child's life than the moral power of quiet example. . . Along with precept, habit, and example, there is also the need for moral literacy . . . as learned through stories, poems, essays, and other literature* (Intro, adapted, p. 11).

Last Sunday during worship the greed issue cropped up again. In one section of our First Church President's presentation of a town issue that is coming up for vote he addressed a question that had been asked of him. To the greed question, "What's in for me?" Mr. Turner answered: "Nothing." Well, after just learning about the

importance of the greed factor in accomplishing a common goal, my forsaken self silently said, "Oh, no!" I was reminded of the countless times that the selfish greed of a person's ego had caused a co-worker to abandon a project, a friend to leave me in the lurch, or an egotistical person to sabotage a common endeavor. The answer 'nothing' hurt my heart with the remembrance of the times that I had been the one to forsake others and to forsake myself.

Fortunately, Warren didn't leave it at that but went on to do some moral exhortation. Appealing to the better side of our humanity he explained: "It's not for you, but for your children. It's not for you, but for the greater good of the town." In closing, Warren added an appeal to faith, saying: "When we come to church we learn to think of others." His last comment reminded me of a classic study of faith conducted by the American psychologist and philosopher, William James. In his research of faith experience, James asked people to describe a personal religious experience. Although he discovered that no two experiences were exactly the same, he did find among *those who had experienced the most profound religious states a virtually universal tendency toward what he called "monism" and "optimism."* *Fundamental bedrock reality is both unified and good* (introduction to the chapter on "Faith" in The Book of Virtues by William J. Bennett p. 742 from The Varieties of Religious Experience by James). His findings echo the faith of the prophet Isaiah who whispered into the ear of a forsaken people about the goodwill that God shows toward God's people. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God (Isaiah 62:3). In like manner, when I offer a prayer before the town meeting I make an appeal to this fundamental bedrock reality by praying: Uniting Spirit, we thank you for gathering us here to deliberate and vote on important matters of common interest to our town. We ask that You bless us and our speech so that the decisions we make will contribute to the commonwealth, common good, and well-being of all. Amen.

So, what do you think? Did Miep Gies, the woman who befriended Anne Frank and harbored her from Nazi discovery for a time ask: "What's in it for me?" Did Martin Luther King, Jr. whom we honor today ask: "What's in it for me?" when he worked for racial justice, non-violence, and spoke out against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam? Did President Obama ask: "What's in it for me and for the United States?" when he committed American resources for the humanitarian rescue and relief efforts in Haiti to help a forsaken people? Did Jesus ask: "What's in it for me?" when his mother told him that the wine had run out? He did. And Jesus said to her, "Mother, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." But fortunately what he also did was to listen to his mother. Then His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do" (John 2:5). Jesus was raised by one who taught him to practice compassionate justice and to show extravagant goodwill towards others in all matters. In his family, thinking only about his own interests and concerns was not an option. Neither was inaction.

What then, is the moral in this story of faith? At the conclusion of the story the steward tasted the wine and said to the bridegroom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" (vs. 10b). In church we learn to think about others. Jesus was raised by a faith community who taught that in order for altruism to blossom among society, the normal "What's in it for me?" egotistical concerns must break free of its cycle of self absorption through self denial and by turning towards God to be in communion with the bedrock unity and goodwill interests of the Divine. Self must talk with and attend to the needs of the Soul. Only then, our faith teaches us, will forsaken believers become the glory of God and be able to say in one voice: Let us do this good thing for the sake of the Lord.