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Compassionate Concern—Seeing Truth in the Face of the Other

Paul Anderson

Truth and Liberation, Chapter 3

Compassionate Concern—Seeing Truth in the Face of the Other

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32) But what does that mean in terms of our relationships with others? When asked which was the greatest of the Ten Commandments, Jesus offered a twofold response. “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

Notice the way Jesus gets to the heart of the Decalogue. Rather than setting up legal boundaries designed to measure insiders and outsiders, Jesus elevates the center—the root of God’s ways. His approach is a radical one (*radix* means “root” in Latin), and Jesus gets to the heart of the matter on this subject and others. If the Ten Commandments can be summarized by the exhortations to love God supremely (Deut 6:5) and to love one’s neighbor compassionately (Lev 19:18), it can also be said that encountering the truth about God and one’s neighbor is the key to loving them. The whole the point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is

to answer the question: “Who is *not* my neighbor?” The answer, according to Jesus, is: “No one isn’t.” (Luke 10:25-37)

Just as seeing the truth about ourselves offers a path to transformation, and as glimpsing the truth of God leads us into authentic worship, so seeing truth in the face of the other thus becomes the key to compassionate concern. However, if humans are created in the divine image, why don’t we simply love others as God loves them? Then again, humans also aspire to the good and tend to disparage evil. Think about it. Doing harm to another can never stand on its own; people always make excuses for wrongdoing or violence. While humanity is indeed fallen, we were first created good—male and female in the image of God, and the biblical story shows how God’s saving-revealing work across the bounds of time and space not only reconciles humans with God and within themselves. It also shows myriad ways forward in terms of reconciling persons with one another. In that sense, we discover the meaning of life when we see that we are called to be extensions of God’s loving and redeeming work in the world, and that endeavor involves our relationships with others.

After all, while four of the Ten Commandments address our relationships with God, the final six address our relationships with others. Indeed, one of the greatest signs of immaturity is the tendency to focus on one’s own needs first. Rather, when one “grows up,” the condition of others becomes a far greater concern than one’s own well-being. Mature persons come to realize that it is not the preservation of self that matters, but it is the enhancing of the vitality of others that counts. Put pointedly, as was said of my own religious heritage as a movement, it “has discovered, neither easily nor quickly, the truth that it exists not for itself, but for the world’s healing.”[1] So it is for all communal ventures, and so it is for each of us also as individuals.

The Jewish psychologist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, put it in a similar way, founding the Third Vienna School of Psychotherapy. Over and against the First and Second Schools, founded by Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, where the drives to sexual fulfillment and power were previously held to be the primary human motivators, Frankl argued that the primary human drive was the search for meaning. He observed in Auschwitz and other death camps that those who

survived were not necessarily the strongest physically, and when it came to survival, sexual interests took a back seat to other concerns.

In Frankl's research as a clinical doctor, he observed that the one thing keeping people alive in the most adverse of circumstances was the embrace of meaning. If people could find meaning in their lives despite the tribulation they were facing, they could find a way to survive. Conversely, when hopes of the Allies rescuing the prisoners in the death camps by Christmas 1944 failed to materialize, many people gave up and died over the next few days. In these and other ways, finding meaning in life empowers the individual to overcome the most dire of circumstances, and meaning invariably relates to the love of others and the calling to make their lives better as a gift of love for the other.

However, if humans were created to make life better not just for themselves, but to tend the Garden and to contribute to the well-being of others, why is it that humans allow others to suffer? Even more problematic, why is it that humans are sometimes involved in causing suffering, perpetuating hatred, or inflicting violence on other women, men, or children whom God also loves? As the Elder in 1 John 4:19-21 puts it:

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Jesus also commanded his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who spitefully use them (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27). However, among the commands to love neighbors, enemies and community members, sometimes loving one another is the most difficult of assignments. After all, one doesn't run into one's adversaries as often as those within community, and we might not expect as much of those who do not share our values. And yet, each of these horizontal concerns of Jesus becomes an extension of our vertical relationship with God. If one has truly embraced the love of God, whom one has not seen, how can one deny the needs of the other, whom one has seen? The way forward lies in seeing truly the face of the other—seeing others as God sees them—which

helps us transcend three obstacles in our interpersonal relationships: indifference, dehumanization, and impatience.

Indifference and Responsibility

On March 13, 1964, a young woman was stabbed to death outside her New York apartment, despite being observed by nearly forty people. Surprisingly, no one called the police, and no one came to her rescue. The *New York Times* hailed the episode as a striking case of bystander apathy. And yet, when the witnesses were interviewed, they all showed deep levels of concern. Each person felt something should have been done to rescue the woman, but seeing other witnesses to the crime—even as it was ongoing—each assumed that somebody else was calling for help or was going to intervene. Yet, no one did. Following the analysis, it became clear that the issue was neither apathy nor indifference; people really cared. The problem was the diffusion of responsibility. People assumed that someone else would take care of stepping in, so no one embraced the mantle of responsibility personally. They failed to see the truth of the situation.

When Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, this is not a command toward self-love; self-care is assumed as a given. Rather, Jesus was summarizing over half of the Ten Commandments as a calling for people to regard the needs of the other as though they were one's own. Are you hungry? You might try to find something to eat. Is your neighbor hungry? You might respond to their hunger as actively as you would respond to your own. Is your neighbor in need of clothing, or help, or company? Attending the needs of those around you as though they were your own allows people to participate with God as partners in alleviating the needs of the world.

Jesus sent his followers out by twos, instructing them to give with no expectation of return. It was like perpetual Serve Day (an event at my University, in which all students, staff, and faculty launch out into the community in as many as a hundred work-groups) wherein people heal the sick, embrace the needy, and wash people's windows. Note that Jesus also instructs his followers to take no money with them; rather, they are to allow others to minister to them, as well. This mutuality of service becomes a pattern, then, for sharing partnership with God in becoming God's hands and feet in the world. We become answers to people's prayers, and sometimes our own, as we avail ourselves to addressing the

needs of the other, seeing their conditions as what we are called to address—as though their needs were our own. As John Woolman puts it:

Wherever men [and women] are true ministers of Jesus Christ it is from the operation of the Spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them and thus giving them a feeling sense of the condition of others.

Prejudice and Rehumanization

Hatred and violence cannot survive unless the full humanity of the other is rationalized or denied. War campaigns thrive only at the expense of the enemy's condition. Their "otherness" embellished by stereotypical constructs; hence, such slogans as "the bad guys," the "them," "people like that—you just can't trust 'em," "the only language they understand is..." and so forth. Along gender divides, males objectify females—and vice versa—enabling less than respectful treatment. Along racial or ethnic lines, external differences are ballooned into categories of virtue or vice. Along political or religious lines, the virtues of one group are levied over and against the vices of the other, causing one's own group to feel self-righteous at the expense of another. Even athletic or school competitions lionize the home team while villainizing the competition. When the other is dehumanized, violence and prejudice are too easily legitimated.

Jesus, however, challenged religious and social systems of value-stratification. He challenged the most righteous and respected members of society—Sadducees and Pharisees (the organizers of worship and the interpreters of Scripture), and he embraced the downtrodden and disparaged—tax collectors, "sinners," the blind, and lepers. In clearing the temple of its merchandizing schemes, he challenged systems of purity availed only to those who could afford the proper sort of sacrifice, or who were able to make the trip to Jerusalem. Unintentionally, such measures of cultic adherence excluded the poor and the sick. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, showing that God cares more about the wholeness of persons than the keeping of regulations. In his teachings, Jesus used commonplace means of explaining the realities of God's ways. Put bluntly, God is never impressed by outward ways of doing it right. God looks on the heart, and those who receive God's grace fully by faith receive God's embrace fully as a grace.

Put otherwise, the God of the heavens never looks at an individual person or a people group as “one of them” or the “them.” Alterity (otherness) does not apply to God, who loves all of his children and calls us each by name. And, God invites us to see each other authentically, as each of us is seen and known by God, inviting us to embrace the full humanity of aliens, adversaries, and even our enemies. The key to such a venture involves opening ourselves to the truth of the other as a human being beloved of God—a fellow child of God—seeing them as God sees them, and responding to their needs as though we were responding to the needs of Christ, himself. As Jesus said of those who did not recall seeing him hungry, naked, or in prison, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matt 25:40)

Impatience and Embrace

When it comes to caring for those within community, sometimes we even neglect one another because of impatience or even a sense of responsibility. We find it all too easy to be impatient with one another because we have high expectations of those who share our values. And, on some levels, this is right and good. On the other hand, because our standards are higher, we might get frustrated with those who should know or behave better but sometimes don't. It might even be the case that not all agree on what is appropriate and what is not. This may have been the case within the Johannine community two millennia ago, as some claimed to be without sin, while others were accused of worldly compromises. Then, as now, participation within a community is a blessed privilege, but it also comes with its own set of challenges.

Another factor in community life is that a lot of work must be done to maintain the community. The fellowship may be rich, and the mission may be compelling, but keeping things going within any corporate venture is always a challenge. Therefore, helping each person do their part becomes an ongoing challenge, but so does keeping in mind the real work to be done, which is to embrace one another and to prioritize relationships even amidst the tasks of the mission. The two sisters, Mary and Martha, each did important work (John 12:1-8; Luke 10:38-42), and finding ways to both embrace maintenance tasks and personal relationships is key to healthy community life.

In all these ways, seeing the truth in the face of the other becomes the means to overcome neglect, prejudice, and friction. Seeing others as Christ sees them, or better yet, seeing others as though they were the embodiment of Christ himself, cannot help but move us to compassionate concern for the other. Such is the root of all true justice and reform, and such is the result of embracing the love of God while extending also that same quality to others as we have each been blessed to receive from God. This poem by an elderly woman in a care facility in Scotland speaks volumes to our blind spots as we learn to see others as God sees them, and as we also might wish to be seen, ourselves.

“A Young Girl Still Dwells”[2]

What do you see, nurse, what do you see?
Are you thinking when you look at me—
A crabbed old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit with far away eyes,
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply
When you say in a loud voice—“I do wish you’d try.”
Who seems not to notice the things that you do
And forever is losing a stocking or shoes,
With bathing and feeding, the long day to fill.
Is that what you’re thinking, is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse. You’re not looking at me.
I’ll tell you who I am as I sit here so still.
As I move at your bidding, eat at your will,
I’m a small child of ten with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters who love one another;
A young girl of sixteen with wings on her feet,

Dreaming that soon a love she'll meet;
A bride at twenty, my heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows that I promised to keep;
At twenty-five now I have young of my own
Who need me to build a secure, happy home.
A woman of thirty, my young ones grow fast,
Bound together with ties that should last.
At forty, my young sons have grown up and gone,
But my man's beside me to see I don't mourn.
At fifty once more babies play round my knee—
Again we know children, my loved one and me.
Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead.
I look at the future, I shudder with dread.
For my young are all rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I've known.
I'm an old woman now and nature is cruel.
'Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.
The body it crumbles, grace and vigor depart.
There is a stone where I once had a heart.
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,
And now again my bittered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain
And I'm loving and living life over again.
I think of the years, all too few, gone too fast,

And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.

So open your eyes, nurse, open and see

Not a crabbed old woman,

Look closer—see me!

[1] Said of the Religious Society of Friends by Neave Brayshaw, *The Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1969) 348.

[2] *Focus on the Family* 9 (1985): 5-6. This poem was written by a woman who died in a geriatric ward of Ashludie Hospital near Dundee (UK). It was found among her possessions and so impressed the staff that copies were made and distributed to every nurse in the hospital. It is addressed to the nurses who surrounded the woman in her last days. But because it cries for recognition of a common humanity, it could have been written to all of us.