

April 23, 1972
I Peter 5:1-7
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A WORD FOR ALTRUISM

Last Sunday we spent the time allotted to the sermon defining and advocating philanthropy, the love of mankind. This morning we are concerned with another word which is similar. The word is "altruism", whose root meaning is, regard for others. "Philanthropy" comes from the Greek; "altruism" derives from Latin.

"Altruism" is a more philosophical term than is "philanthropy". The only distinguishing difference in the meaning of the two words seems to be that philanthropy involves the emotions, whereas altruism urges us to regard the interest of others pretty much from a purely ethical point of view.

As many of you will know, there has sprung up in our generation a new philosophical system which is dedicated to erasing all altruistic qualities from the human mind and heart. It has derived primarily from the writings of a woman who surely needs no woman's liberation movement to insure her right to be heard. Author of several best selling novels, she has continually denigrated altruism and urges men and women to be motivated purely by self-interest, or what might be referred to as a kind of elevated selfishness.

Altruism has to do with certain characteristics which are not to be found in all men. It may well be a learned response. But like all learned responses, if that is what it is, it is the result of mankind's collective experience. Men developed altruistic attitudes because they discovered that such attitudes contributed to man's well being, and self-centered, egocentric attitudes had quite the opposite affect.

In The Descent of Man, Charles Darwin noted the altruistic aspects of some men and the consequences of such altruism. Wrote he:

"When two tribes of primeval men, living in the same country, came into competition, if (other circumstances being equal) the one tribe included a great number of courageous, sympathetic and faithful members, who were always ready to warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other, this tribe would succeed better and conquer the others."

If Charles Darwin was correct in his reading of man's historical evolution, which in this case I for one surely believe him to have been, then what we are talking about is not just an interesting speculation on abstract philosophy, but the very existence of civilization itself, and the quality of that existence.

Hear Charles Darwin again on this matter:

"Obscure as is the problem of the advance of civilization, we can at least see that the nation which produced, during a lengthened period, the greatest number of highly intellectual, energetic, brave, patriotic and benevolent men, would generally prevail over less favored nations."

Darwin went on to make an interesting observation. He predicted that altruism would grow and prosper among men because altruistic men could teach and influence more people than a selfish man could biologically produce. Unfortunately, Darwin seems to have failed to realize that selfish men are also teachers and examples and one is forced today to wonder if their teaching and their example is not far outweighing the teaching and example of the benevolent and the altruistic.

II

Now I am forced to say a word in this connection about our congregation's current effort to raise funds with which to build and operate a home for the aging. You will forgive me for speaking of that subject I trust, when I tell you I would feel derelict in my duty as a Christian minister if I did not say this.

A great many questions which come to my attention as our canvassers go out to seek to raise these funds seem to reflect what I would have to regard as an erroneous attitude toward this whole project. Instead of looking on it as a great opportunity to serve human need; instead of looking at it as a benevolent and Christian service extended toward the elderly, too many are asking, "What's in it for me? What will I get out of it? How will I benefit?"

When I have mentioned this to a few other persons I have been assured that this is but a reflection of human nature. This is precisely what worries and saddens me. Is this human nature? Is man basically selfish? Is altruism and philanthropy dead and has self-regard won the day? If so, and if Darwin's theory based on a careful study of human history is correct, then our civilization would certainly seem to be on the decline, for according to Darwin, that tribe or society which included the greatest number of persons unwilling to aid and defend one another would be most likely to fail.

Did you by any chance watch that television program the other night which traced the decline and fall of the lost Indian tribes of America--the Aztec, the Inca, the Mayan? What was generally conceded to be the cause of the fall and decay was the almost total absence of altruism on the part of the leaders of those societies. They were despotic and tyrannical, exercising absolute authority untempered by any particle of philanthropic love for mankind. What happened to those societies can happen to us, and, in my opinion, is happening to us. It is our very prosperity and affluence which is destroying the finest moral and ethical qualities which have marked the America of the past.

Hear again the words of the Apostle Peter written in the midst of the same kind of cruel and ugly world as marked those Indian civilizations:

"Tend that flock of God whose shepherds you are, and do it not under compulsion, but of your own free will, as God would have it; not for gain but out of sheer devotion."

That, I submit to you, is pure and unadulterated altruism, regard for others-- but it was that kind of altruism that kept hope alive in the midst of widespread despair and finally managed to bring a measure of light to a dark and dreary world.

And now hear Francis Merchant say almost the same thing nearly 2000 years later in the form of a short parable:

Among those who listened to the Messenger was a young man. "Why should we be grateful to anyone? Life is hard. Problems abound--this is the course of human life."

"Whether man learns more from prosperity than from adversity is an open question," replied the Messenger. "The world has not been created for your comfort and convenience. The environment of Adam and Eve, perfect though it was, did not make them more appreciative, tractable, and law-abiding. Human prescriptions for ideal conditions might simply produce inertia and stagnation. If a sharp blow is required before a stone emits a spark, how much pressure is necessary before a star radiates light?"

"Innumerable are the beings who have labored in our behalf. Nothing exists that wasn't first created. Everything on this planet is a precipitate of finer energies. Ages upon ages have come and gone to prepare the earth for the possibility of man's unfoldment."

"How much does every human being owe to the unknown powers that structured the universe?"

"How much does he owe for the gift of life, the possibility of gathering the experiences that will enable him to transform his being?"

"How much does he owe to the generations that have gone before, and whose discoveries have been bequeathed to him?"

"How much does he owe to the great spiritual teachers, who have blazed trails to the highest?"

"How much does he owe to the great unknown for all that has been done for him of which he is unaware, of sacrifices beyond his understanding, of gifts he has never recognized?"

"Our debt is immense--and so should be our gratitude.

"To take the world and all its varied gifts for granted is the action of a spiritual barbarian.

"Only humility is befitting man who, in his vast ignorance, does not know his benefactors." (1)

III

Peter, as did Francis Merchant, concluded his admonition by advocating humility. What is humility but that we think less of ourselves and more of others. It is concentration on the self which prevents us from thinking of others. Paul advocated humility also for he knew its value: "Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think," he wrote. Humility is the recognition that all we have and all we are is derived from the grace of God and the altruism of others. Humility is gratitude and appreciation.

Courtland Sayres shared with us some thoughts on humility and gratitude:

"One midnight, deep in starlight still,
I dreamed that I received this bill:
_____ in account with life:
Five thousand breathless dawns all new;
Five thousand flowers fresh in dew;
Five thousand sunsets wrapped in gold;
One million snowflakes served ice-cold;
Five quiet friends; one baby's love;
One white-mad sea with clouds above;
One hundred music-haunted dreams
Of moon drenched roads and hurrying streams;
Of prophesying winds and trees;
Of silent stars and browsing bees;
One June night in a fragrant wood;
One heart that loved and understood.
I wondered when I waked at day
How--how in God's name--I could pay!

I can never repay, but I can share, I can think of others,
I can be grateful. Amen.