

HELPING PEOPLE

I have been trying to recall and count up all the people I have run into in my lifetime who do not believe in helping other people. So far I have not been able to get a single name on my list. A few names went down at first, but in each case, a moment's reflection made it clear that they had to be erased. Certainly I have run into individuals who had what seemed to me rather bizarre notions of how to go about helping people; the variety of convictions and methods on the subject is staggering. But truly, I cannot recall knowing anyone thus far who did not think a lot about and care a lot about helping people.

The common assumption is that most people do not believe in trying to help others. The problem with life, we tend to think, is that most folk are greedy, self-centered, too busy to be bothered with the plight of others. Therefore, one of the great missions in life is to educate people out of their "natural" lack of caring, and to inspire them to try to help their neighbors. We tell ourselves that if we could only find a way to get people to care about each other, the world would be such a wonderful place. The trouble, we think, is that most people just do not care very much about others – aside from me and a few of my friends, of course.

This whole line of reasoning makes perfect sense and seems to match my experience with reality – until or unless I make one fatal mistake and start looking for the individuals who match this description of how almost everybody is. I cannot actually recall a single one. Some people come a little closer than others perhaps, but nobody in my experience seems very close at all to the way "most everybody" is. It's very hard to remember that nobody is really like almost everybody is supposed to be!

In reality, we live in a world where everybody believes in helping people. Nobody has to talk anybody into it; we already really want to help people. In fact, if you try to encourage somebody to be caring about others, you are merely being arrogant and irritating. But caring and wanting to help is not the issue. Something else is. If people already care and want to help people, then what is the problem in our world that keeps making it look like there is not enough caring or help going on?

Helping people is not easy. I think that's the answer. I think that's what throws everything off. We have all inherited the myth that helping people is easy. All you have to do is *want* to. The assumption is that we can all help people any time we want to, as much as we are willing to. Therefore, since there is still so much need – since so many people are not getting help – it must mean that we and almost all others are still mostly selfish, mostly uncaring, mostly unwilling to put ourselves out to help others. What other conclusion could there be?

The only other conclusion is one that is unbearable. That is why the myth persists, and why we go on assuming the worst. It is not easy to help people. It may not even be possible. Who has moxie enough to face that? If we are merely selfish or uncaring, there may be some hope for us – maybe we will change, even at the zero hour, and make the world all right. But if we are helpless, or even if helping people is one of the most difficult and complex tasks in all the world, then what hope is there for us? It is so much easier to live with the notion that I can but I do not want to, than to face the stark reality that I want to but cannot.

The greatest and deepest pathos in life is wanting to help and not being able to. Any time a loved one is suffering or dying and we stand by helpless, we know again the worst of life. We will do almost anything to avoid such intolerable situations. It's much better to see ourselves as greedy or selfish or sinful; at least that way maybe we can be punished and maybe things will be okay again. But if we are helpless, then what? It is not easy to help people. It may be almost impossible. The myth that we can do it any time we want to, any old way we like, whenever we get kindhearted enough and generous enough to want to – well, it just is not true. But we perpetuate the myth, reinforce it for each other, and teach it to our children because it hurts less than facing the truth: it is not easy to help people.

May I remind you of a few of the side issues and complexities? I know one church leader who says the big problem is not in *convincing* people to do good, but handling the jealousy if somebody actually *does* good. Paul certainly had that problem at Corinth. (I Corinthians 12-14) He kept saying that all the gifts, all the leadership, all the efforts and energies were needed and valuable. But at Corinth, they kept wanting to stop and quarrel about who was doing the most good. I guess it never has stopped from that day to this, both in churches and between churches. We are so desperately hungry to see ourselves

as people who help people that we claw at any evidence or possibility like ten lions over a morsel of meat.

Some individuals see the church's primary purpose as an outlet for the urge to help people. That way they can feel good about their giving and good intentions without having to deal with the real-life failures and struggles of a personal effort to help people.

James Breech, in his book *The Silence of Jesus*, points out the complexity that surrounds our efforts to help. He says that humanitarianism focuses on the suffering of mankind in order to avoid caring about actual people as real people. Altruism, on the other hand, affirms another in order to escape from self. Actually, Dr. Breech puts it more strongly: "Altruism is a form of self-hatred posing as its opposite – love [for another]."

It is obvious that helping people is a topic surrounded by strong opinions, even violent passions. No human, to my knowledge, is uninterested or unbiased about the subject. And distributing Thanksgiving or Christmas baskets, no matter how big or how many, is really not going to cover the subject. Neither are the old individualism statements, which seem to be coming back in some quarters today: "If everyone would sweep in front of his own door, tomorrow the whole world would be clean." Or, "If everyone would help his next-door neighbor, tomorrow nobody would be in need." The logic is lovely and such sayings have real merit, but they hardly help us with our border wars – physical, emotional, or spiritual.

So we live in a world where everybody wants to help people. But how, when, where, and whom? It is not easy to help people. If we are talking about significant help, it may not even be possible.

Jesus knew all of this, and He struggled with it mightily. He knew it a lot more clearly than we will probably allow ourselves to know it. The crucifixion and Jesus' refusal to avoid it make this clear. Trying to help people requires a Savior, a rebirth of mind and heart, the descent or infusion of the Holy Spirit, a new purpose, and a new way of living to go with it. That's what the New Testament thinks. And we are going to help people with a little food, or a little money, or some information, or some extra kindness and attention? That's interesting. It cost *Jesus* everything.

Well, but Jesus seemed to agree with the Old Testament dictum, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Why do people think that means Christmas baskets or helping somebody change a tire? Maybe it means, “If you are not going to go all the way, stay out of it. Or at least keep out of the way.”

The forty days in the wilderness were when Jesus had to wrestle with the question, “How do you help people?” Satan said, “Feed them.” Jesus said, “That is not going to make it.” For the most part, the church is still pretty sure Satan had the right idea. Satan also suggested that Jesus use political organization and power to help the people. Again, Jesus realized He would fail if He built His ministry on such terms. Again, for the most part, the church suspects that Satan had the right idea. And there was the third temptation. But if we cannot even see through the first two, you can imagine what chance we would have with the third!

Nevertheless, Jesus rejected the temptations to build His ministry on any of the traditional ways of helping people. Clearly Jesus knew that helping people was not easy. He seemed to know that only God’s power could help anyone: that He Himself would have to stay surrendered, humble, obedient – not the genius in command of salvaging other people, but the servant of God – or Satan would corrupt the entire mission so swiftly and subtly that few would ever even notice. At least that seems to be Jesus’ realization and conclusion from His time of prayer and fasting. Only God can help people. Everything must be done by God’s timing and patience and guidance.

So we watch Jesus after the wilderness. What mighty new power and method will He call upon and depend upon to accomplish His purpose, having rejected all the normal, familiar approaches? He does a lot of things, here and there, off and on. But the real power is so low-key, so strange and unlikely, that at first we do not see anything. Jesus just wanders around talking. He performs miracles here and there. There does not seem to be any thrust, any plan, any forward motion. Mostly Jesus is making twelve friends, shaping and forming a “community,” and slowly inviting others into the community.

It takes time. Nothing seems to be happening at first. But you have to *be* a community in order to invite others into the community. Each individual, of course, is dedicated to God even more than to the community. But the community is the rallying point, the power,

the source of healing and support and inspiration that carries the Message. People find both the Word and the Spirit by finding and becoming part of the community of Jesus.

I am hopeful that this year, our Board of Outreach will continue to seek and present us with concepts of ministry until this congregation finds the area where the Holy Spirit wants this particular church to be truly engaged. In the meantime, I get a little weary of the animosity I keep feeling from some of the social-action enthusiasts in this congregation. My plea has never been that we should have no concern for helping people. Everybody wants to help people – even me. My plea has been that we try to figure out what we are really trying to do, and whether or not we are doing it as the community of Jesus Christ.

In the early church, as nearly as can be pieced together, the communion meal was also like a bread line. The Christians gathered to eat, and they brought with them whomever they had encountered who was willing to come. Eating, talking, feeding the hungry, telling about Jesus, praying, and finding a group of loving and accepting friends were all intertwined and happening at the same time. Doesn't such a communion sound alive and wonderful? The early Christians would have found it hard to understand how we could care about somebody and leave them out of the community. Today, we mostly try to help *without* inviting people into the faith community.

We live in a world where everybody believes in helping people – where everybody wants to help – if they can only figure out how or agree with a few others about when and where. We are not going to do that very well if we do it casually or according to our own whims or moods. It needs to be intentional, and with the whole community aware and involved. And we have to invite people in and expect them to help because they have been helped. Receiving help without learning to give help means you have not been helped yet.