

DOES GOD CARE ABOUT BROTHERLY LOVE?

How are we doing? This is a familiar question, and we give lots of serious and lots of less-than-genuine answers to this question. The truth is, we have no clear idea how we are doing. There are too many dimensions to the question. And every few minutes the shades and colors and circumstances are swirling and changing all around us. The ancient Greeks used to say: “Call no man happy until he is dead.” They knew that success could switch to disaster at a moment’s notice, or vice versa.

How are we doing? Do we mean economically; spiritually; relationally; politically? Do we mean our personal health, or the condition of the environment, or the prospects for unity and peace? Our welfare is dramatically impacted by all of these areas of reality on earth, and many of us assume and suspect that our welfare in the realms beyond will also be dramatically impacted by these and many other factors. We experience our life here in the awareness that we are small units in a huge and ever-changing environment. How are we doing, indeed! Most of the time we realize that we are in control of very little of all that is going on all around us. It is therefore disconcerting to realize, when people are angry at us or blaming us, that they are assuming and expecting that *we* are in control of all the things *they* cannot control, and that we are letting them go bad on purpose.

If we are learning to trust God, that may be one of the biggest issues – one of the biggest secrets we can learn – about being alive here. But that does not put us in charge either. Almost the reverse. It does not guarantee our safety, and it certainly does not guarantee that we will be treated fairly. Even more disturbing, it does not guarantee that we will treat others fairly, or that we will always be among the “children of light” when it comes to our own choices and our own behavior.

Most of the time, as most of you know, I am enthralled with the stories Jesus tells us; with the things that are revealed by His encounters with other people; by the way Life is illuminated by what He taught and did and said, and what happened to Him as a result. “*New wine in new wineskins,*” for instance. And “*I am the vine, you are the branches.*” “*You must be born anew.*” “*In my Father’s house are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you.*” Without such hope and light, personally I would be bereft. I think this is a hard

place. I have thought so ever since I was a small boy. In my opinion, there are only a few sources of light and hope available to us – that is, only a few sources of light and hope that do not wither and shrivel up when the WAY gets hard.

So I love being in a Disciple Band with others who care about such things. What we share is often painful, disturbing, even infuriating. But what we share is also full of the Spirit's presence, and it is laced with new assignments and with new challenges to live by the faith and hope we really believe in. This world, for all its woes, is not bigger than God's Kingdom, nor is it more important than our Life in Christ Jesus. So I do not get tired of "Life in the *Ecclesia*" – at least not for this first sixty years. Maybe by tomorrow I will start to get tired of it.

But from time to time, even I get a desire to step back and try to see the larger picture. Most of the time the larger picture is too vast for me. Secretly I suspect that it is also too vast for most of the people who like to talk about it a lot. If we see the flaws in our own constructs, sometimes we also see the flaws in the constructs others are putting out there. And if they themselves do not notice them, well – never mind.

Anyway, I have no intention of getting into global truth or anything. But I do know, and so do all of you, that for the past four thousand years, there is one issue that has been causing us mayhem, murder, heartache, and disaster on a regular basis and pretty much all over the world. And it is not getting any better. In fact, most of the evidence suggests that it is getting worse. Lots of the people I listen to think it is the single most likely source – cause, instigator – for the next huge war, the consequences of which we can hardly imagine.

I am talking, of course, about the unresolved conflict between Isaac and Ishmael. That translates into the unresolved conflict between Jews and Palestinians and the unresolved conflict between Muslims and Christians. There is a seething, roiling ocean of mistrust, hatred, anger, pain; of charges and countercharges; of accusations and counter-accusations – between the people of Islam and the people of Christianity. There are small pockets of people here and there who do not fit into the normal categories of active hatred and anger, but they are what we used to call "a drop in the bucket." Isaac and Ishmael are brothers (half brothers) – both sons of Abraham. Whether we realize it or like it or not, this is an issue of "brotherly love."

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Do we know any religion on the face of the earth that does not have teachings, commandments, precepts, and mandates about the necessity for brotherly love? Do we know any religion or even a quasi-religion that does not believe that God is clear and adamant about the *requirements* for brotherly love? So if brothers and the descendants of brothers have decided that they can take such precepts and commandments with a grain of salt – can excuse themselves from the requirements of commandments that they all claim to know and believe have come from God – what will we get? We will get four thousand years of hatred, bloodshed, anger, and animosity. Meaning, we will get exactly and precisely what we have gotten.

I understand that for the vast majority of people in our society, this is all ancient history and everybody knows that God – if there really is a God – has absolutely nothing to do with it. I don't know why they are so certain about this. Do they really think God is just a figment of human imagination? What human would be stupid enough to insist on brotherly love? I mean, seeing what we see and know to be going on all around us. Or maybe God was just talking to hear himself talk? Brotherly love is really just a matter of opinion – take it or leave it, if we happen to feel like it?

It is not our theories – it is our *experience* that wherever we leave brotherly hatreds untended, they tear the world apart. Samaritans, blacks, gays, Muslims, and endless others: they dot our history with almost unimaginable pain and suffering because we seem so certain that being religious has nothing to do with obeying God's mandates. Yet I know nobody who is religious who does not believe that one of the major mandates we have from God is a mandate about brotherly love.

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I like to read the Bible. You would think I would know better by now, but old habits are hard to break. Anyway, I am reading along in this story about Isaac and Ishmael and come to this part where God says to Abraham: *“I have heard your request about Ishmael; I have blessed him and I shall make him fruitful. I shall give him many descendants; he will be father of twelve princes, and I shall raise a great nation from him.”*

Of course my first reaction is to rejoice. Oh wonderful! God loves Ishmael too. Ishmael also has a great destiny before him. Well, that may be *your* first reaction, but it is never mine. I can end up there,

after considerable reflection and prayer and some serious dialogue with the Spirit. But I *never* start out there. My first reaction is that this is getting things set up all wrong. This is going to be an endless problem. What's God doing? I thought God was supposed to be on our side!

The twelfth chapter is bad enough, but the twenty-first chapter is far worse. Hagar and Ishmael are sent off into the wilderness of Beersheba. They have run out of water and are about to perish – which would have taken care of everything. But our God, who we always want to rescue *us*, hears Ishmael crying (*Ishmael* means “God will hear”), so God intervenes, fills Hagar with new hope and purpose, shows them a well so they will have plenty of water – and God is “with Ishmael” as he grows up. So now we have millions of Muslims making life harder for us everywhere we go. Thanks a lot, God! Why couldn't You just leave things alone for once? So now we have all these “extra brothers” to love, and we are pretty sure that there are not very many of them who love us.

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Like you, I have heard endless comments, suggestions, and plans put forward about how to resolve the “tensions in the Middle East.” Even the phraseology is misleading and insulting. A good many of the liberals I read (or know) seem to think that all we have to do is come up with a plan that would be mutually beneficial to all parties concerned. It is not fair, and certainly not accurate, but a good many of the “liberals” I know do not take religion very seriously. Oh, maybe a few moral precepts are honored, and they certainly have good intentions. But “*shalom shalom v'ein shalom.*” Jeremiah's huge complaint: “*They have healed the wound of my people lightly, crying 'peace, peace, when there is no peace.'*” (Jeremiah 6:10-14)

And what about the land? Every deeply religious Jew believes that God (Yahweh) promised to give “the promised land” to the Jews. That is, God promised to give the land from the borders of Egypt to the River Euphrates as a covenant promise to the Jewish people. But the Koran says that God has promised this *same land* to the Muslims.

So if you want peace in the Middle East, you have to find some way to explain to the Jews why God's promise has been repealed, why God has played them false, why God has lied to them. In short,

you have to explain to Judaism that their God is false – does not really exist – and so the promise is null and void. Or if you want peace in the Middle East, you have to find a way to explain to the Muslims that Allah is false, that the promise is null and void – that Allah has lied to them or forsaken them, or that Allah was just a figment of their imaginations.

“Good luck,” as we used to say. This is not some minor issue or some insignificant misunderstanding that can be resolved by some smooth-talking politicians sitting down to negotiate a rational treaty. Who do we think is going to be the first to admit and acknowledge that their God is false? That the promise is a lie? That the covenant is a hoax?

The only way in Hell – or under Heaven, if we prefer – that there will ever be peace in the Middle East is if the brothers decide that they have to love each other again. And not because they want to, but because God demands it. I cannot imagine such a thing, you understand. But that is the only hope. If the brothers love each other, the conflicting promises are no longer an inevitable war. If the brothers love each other, they can share the destiny and the promise.

God, as some of us have learned to our sorrow, does not have to be in a hurry. God does not have to change the precepts because we do not like them or because we have decided to ignore them. If we do not want to learn, God can just wait. And if the damage accrues and increases beyond all normal bounds (from our perspective), then God can still go on waiting and waiting. Who needs a Hell when we already know so many ways to punish ourselves and each other? If we do not want to take seriously the precepts about “love for your brother,” there cannot be a true peace for anyone – no fullness of “peace or love on earth.” And that *is* our experience. Do the math! Or in this case, do the spiritual math. If I do not believe I have to love my brother unless I want to – unless I feel like it, unless it suits me – then how much of God’s Kingdom will I be able to experience here on earth? And of course the real kicker is: If I cannot learn about brotherly love *here*, how much of God’s Kingdom do I think will be open to me or that I will be able to experience in the realms to come?

We did not used to have such problems. Only the “right sort of people” were going to make it into Heaven anyway. But now that Jesus has convinced us that God is far more loving than we thought, what is God going to do about all our problems in the realms to come? Is there

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one Heaven for Muslims, another for Christians, another for Hindus, and on and on? This thing about loving each other is a real bitch – even in this one tiny little church.

How is it that we get to imagining that we are almost ready for Heaven right now – that our Spiritual Life and growth are already good enough that we can just sort of coast on in from here? Most of our society is convinced that it does not need to be religious anymore: it does not need the church, or daily prayer, or to study the Scriptures – or to be truly serious about allegiance and devotion to God. We have impossible problems here on earth, but the only thing that makes them impossible is that we will not *listen* to our Creator.

Everywhere we look, it is obvious that we are already very nearly perfect. There is no need for evangelism anymore. Very few of us still need to be born anew. The people of the church are almost obsolete and have very little left to accomplish. And only a handful of us are still praying: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*”