

I had an interesting conversation with a friend this week as I was preparing for today's message. I brought up the subject of altruism. She said that true altruism doesn't exist - especially if you're coming from a corporate or political mentality. She felt that every kind and compassionate act was ultimately tied to getting ahead, to meet the bottom line, to self-serving interests.

I disagreed and decided more research on altruism was warranted. In my search, I discovered an interesting philosophy of Ayn Rand, a Russian immigrant, born to nonobservant Jewish parents in 1905. A Russian novelist & philosopher, who is known for her two best-selling novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Deciding in high school that she was an atheist, Rand went on to develop a philosophical system she called **Objectivism**, advocating "reason" as the only means of acquiring knowledge, and rejecting all forms of faith and religion. In various interviews Rand stated that religion was evil, a "sign of psychological weakness," and that "Nobody has ever given a reason why man should be his brother's keeper." "I'm establishing a new code of morality not based on faith, but based on reason," she answered. "Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life and that happiness, not pain or mindless self-indulgence, is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof in the results of your loyalty to the achievement of your values ... if any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject." So, according to Rand, sacrifice and altruism, as well as love of your fellow man, are things to be rejected. Rand's philosophy emphasized individual rights, and considered capitalism the only moral social system.

I can't help but think that many of our social maladies, and disparities in our nation, come directly from an adherence to this kind of philosophy. And perhaps, the underlying pinnings of the movement "Occupy Wall Street" is somehow related to this tension between capitalism and altruism. It affects us further if we see a correlation between our government's budget and the philosophy of Ayn Rand.

In direct contrast to the radical individualism of "objectivism", we have the Judeo-Christian tradition, which does not attempt to explain altruism, but lives it out in commandment after commandment.

Lev. 23:22: "When you reap the harvest of your land, Leave gleanings for the poor and needy."

Deut 15:1: God orders Israel, "At the end of every seven years, you must cancel debts"

Deut 15:11: "There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and sisters, toward the poor and needy in your land."

Mt 6:2: "When you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do."

Mt 22:39: Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Mt 7:12: Jesus said, "So in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you."

Altruism is not strictly the domain of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Altruism is also present in Buddhism and Islam. The ability to help others, even at personal cost, is considered an important part of the expression of religious faith for many people.

There are many examples of such altruism:

Giving one's life for one's nation, church, community, ethnic group. Charitable donations. The natural desire to help someone who is struggling. Volunteer work. Doing a friend a favor.

Altruism is an expression of concern for the welfare of others without any obvious benefit/motivation on the part of the individual expressing the concern. Some will say, like my friend did, coming from a corporate mentality, that if people do anything for the common good, or participate in any type of group behavior, it is only because they ultimately have their own interest at heart.

So let us look at a few contrasting stories in real life. A story has come out of China this past week featuring a two-year old toddler who ended up dying after being struck and run over by a van. Over the next 7 minutes, 18 people were video-taped walking/cycling by as another van hits the little girl. Eventually an illiterate scrap picker scoops her up just as the girl's mother rushes into the street.

The plight of the child came to symbolize what many Chinese see as a decay in public morals in the midst of economic growth and rising prosperity. Some experts said an unwillingness to help others is an outgrowth of urbanization as migrants create neighborhoods of strangers.

In China, there are no Good Samaritan laws that encourage you to help when someone is in danger. In fact, people have been either sued by the family of the injured person or held responsible by local authorities for harm, so people avoid getting involved. In 2006, a man who escorted an elderly woman to the hospital after she broke her leg was ordered to pay 40% of the medical bill. It was inconceivable that he would go to such lengths to help the woman if he wasn't somehow responsible for her injury. If you hadn't done it, why would you have taken them to the hospital? No normal person would have taken them.

This death, along with so many other unfortunate events beg the question of asking "Who is my neighbor?" Many comments posted to social media sites said "*we are all passers-by.*" Could such an event have happened in a city like Seattle? Perhaps not, but are we not passers-by on other occasions, where we choose not to get involved, we choose to not go the extra mile.

Do you remember the story of altruism that hit the news in early January 2007? Wesley Autrey. A 50-year-old black construction worker and Navy veteran was standing on a NY subway platform with his two daughters when a young white man nearby suffered a seizure and fell on the tracks. Autrey leapt onto the tracks in front of a train and pinned the stranger down as the subway raced overhead, so close that it greased Autrey's hair. Both men lived. Autrey's act was altruism in action, the innate sense of empathy for others. The problem with altruism is that it's in short supply because it has to compete with a balancing force in human nature--selfishness--or what we might more charitably describe as the will to survive and prosper. But some people sacrificially give of themselves to those who are outside their group and with whom they have absolutely nothing in common. Like Mother Teresa, Oscar Schindler, many others. That is the nobility of humankind in its purist form.

The Blind Side: Big Mike was a good kid who faces hard times. But he was also homeless, family-less, discarded by society, a poor, black kid going nowhere. Michael has no idea who his father is and his mother is a crack head. Michael has had little formal education and few skills to help him learn. When he is given a seat at the Wingate Christian School, almost everyone expects him to fail. He still has no place to sleep at night. But no one counted on the Tuohy's. This African-American teen is taken in by a kind-hearted, white family, who welcomes Michael into their well-off home. A family committed to doing the right thing, they bring Mike into their home, give him a bed, a meal. They not only provide him with a loving home, when he expresses an interest in football, they go all out to help him; and hire a tutor to help him improve his grades. The transformation that follows is breathtaking. By living with the Tuohy's, Big Mike has an opportunity to hone his natural giftedness for football, and in return, Big Mike helps the Tuohy's to become a more connected, relational family. The Blind Side shows how acts of love change both the giver and the receiver. It is the true story of how Big Mike became Michael Oher. Fast forward to 2006: Michael becomes an All-American football star at the University of Mississippi, and later, first round draft pick at left tackle for the Baltimore Ravens. So why did the couple reach out to Oher? "Because he needed some clothes. That's all it really was. Then he needed a place to sleep. The depths of need never stopped. And she got so far into it, she couldn't get out of it. And she fell in love with him," Sean Tuohy told the Chronicle.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" When this question was posed to Jesus 2000 years ago, Jesus did some picking and choosing of scripture, just as we all do, for there were 613 laws to follow in the Torah. How was a person to keep track of them all, let alone prioritize them? Jesus answers with two positive commandments from the Torah: "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deut 6: 5) and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Levi 19: 18). "On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets."

Did you ever wonder why those are the greatest commandments of our faith? I propose a single answer: because loving God and loving others makes us more human, more altruistic, if you will. If you are going to love God with all your heart, then that love **will be expressed as** love for your neighbor. Christianity is about this path or way of transformation. And transformation involves practice. The process of becoming more and more deeply centered in God, and that requires an attention to our relationship with God.

C. S. Lewis, 20th century *To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.*