

The Rationale for Religion

Romans 13:8-14

If there is anything that brings hope this morning and has warmed our hearts in recent weeks, it is the remarkable charitable response we have witnessed in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. Most of it is ongoing in Texas and Louisiana (as it will be for months and years to come), and just beginning throughout the Caribbean and Florida, where neighbors are assisting neighbors, strangers are helping strangers—all to survive and recover from nature's overwhelming destructive power. As we already know, emergency relief coming in the form of material resources and donations of money are arriving from around the country and world to aid the endless number of victims.

As devastating as these and other catastrophic events can be (e.g., Chiapas earthquake, western wildfires, etc.), we often marvel at the levels of generosity and care expressed by ordinary people. Unexpected sacrifices are commonly made in times of crisis which are less likely to occur under normal circumstances. Average citizens put their lives and private concerns aside (as well as their differences) to do what they can to serve their neighbors; their kindness and commitment carried out indiscriminately in ways that express humanity at its best—precisely what we wish would continue once things get restored and renewed. An infectious spirit of merciful compassion takes over in an adrenalin rush to breach the normal behaviors and barriers separating people, including the more tribal ones of race and class which are virtually impenetrable during better times. For a relatively brief period in the midst of common suffering, victims are embraced by others simply for being in need and whoever requires a

helping hand is offered it, even by those who might otherwise pass by or overlook these who are, in fact, their neighbors.

It is a beautiful thing to behold. I suppose, one could argue we've needed a broadly-sensed spirit of goodwill in our country for a while, given the last few years of increasing hostility, incivility, and meanness haunting so much of society. We are overdue for something inspirational to reaffirm our better angels and to bring people out of their private worlds and partisan camps to recognize common needs and to work together for the common good.

Oddly, it often takes something terribly wrong to make us wonderfully right—to start behaving the way we should as human beings. Survival is a great equalizer; in certain moments it can build ties that otherwise would not exist. The differences between people become less significant when there is a mutual recognition that we need one another. Watching out for one's neighbor (however that gets expressed) is one of the more natural responses we have as human beings in times of crisis and it's something we often lose sight of when life is going reasonably well.

I suppose, this may explain why heroic risks and sacrifices and acts of selflessness seem so unusual and remarkable when we see them played out! For some reason, we're surprised that people come out of the woodwork to lend a hand, especially if they volunteer and don't view it as their duty. We lionize them as if they're unusual to reach out to neighbors and strangers, when in fact altruism is a fairly common behavior in anyone; it's how we find purpose and meaning to our lives as human beings. It's one of the ways we experience happiness—to help someone in need. Maybe because we live in a generation where most of us can get by on our own, where a lot of our needs are easily met, that we can close ourselves off into our own

private worlds and lose sight of how much human civilization has survived down through the ages by people helping each other out.

The late writer and essayist, David Rakoff, made this interesting comment: “Altruism is innate, but it’s not instinctual. Everybody’s wired for it, but a switch has to be flipped.” I would agree. We’re all wired for selfless behavior, but something has to compel us to act in this way. When life is routine and normal, most people are preoccupied with their own issues and concerns, but certain crises or situations will trigger a response to step outside of themselves and into the lives of others. The most compelling motivations for this are empathy and compassion—certainly more than mere duty. Empathy is the switch that gets flipped, compelling people to go out of their way to help someone in need. We’ve seen that with the relief efforts, but you and I know it occurs every day. People (some more than others) will respond quite altruistically when they are emotionally moved and compelled to act. Altruism is triggered by empathy—the ability to identify with another’s suffering. When we feel compelled to act, we will often (in the process) discover a deep sense of satisfaction and personal happiness that comes with it; our life has real purpose and meaning, something that will remain etched in our memory. Empathy is the primary reason we take care of others when we don’t have to.

Now, I would like to believe that empathy is intrinsic to us, but that, too, is a switch that needs to be turned on. A better way to put it is empathy must be cultivated within us. Frankly, most people, left to their own devices, are not particularly empathetic toward others (especially if they get jaded over time), with the possible exception of those they love (even that’s not guaranteed). When people are not exposed to someone

else's pain or need, it's easy then to stand back in judgment and disassociate from it—to have no emotional attachment to the plight of others. You can tell when this happens because the nonempathetic response is to criticize the situation—to blame the victims as it were (e.g., *Why didn't they prepare? Why did they put themselves into this situation?*).

Blaming victims is a perfect example of a lack of empathy. If we find ourselves doing that, then an alarm bell should go off in our heads and hearts reminding us that our complaint says more about our lack of empathy than expressing any fair judgment about another person's circumstances. Even if we don't feel compelled to help another person in their time of need, one thing we can do is work on cultivating some empathy for what they are going through. Trying to understand someone's plight is the least we can do!

But let me take it one step further. Cultivating empathy for others is, in many ways, the primary purpose and value of religion and religious faith. That may sound ridiculous, given the manner in which many “religious” people behave. Or it may seem odd, given that religious traditions tend to focus on God and getting into heaven. Unfortunately, I think we've been misled. Religion, as I see it, is far more about cultivating empathy for other human beings than just about anything else. You can debate me on this, but I believe Christianity is less about regurgitating doctrines and rituals than learning how to love our neighbors. The rationale for religion (perhaps of any type) is to cultivate empathy toward other people. Granted, there are many other things that religion does (some of it not so good), but the rationale for religion is to teach us how to love one another.

If you're a bit skeptical about my claim, let me step back and see if it resonates with what we hear in the teachings of Jesus as well as the writings of Paul. Let's make this easy by seeing how Jesus summarized his teachings about the law of Moses and prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus affirmed the Golden Rule—a teaching that is found in virtually every religious tradition on earth: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt. 7:12).

Let me follow it up with another reference in Matthew, when a lawyer asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus replied with the traditional Hebrew teaching, the Shema: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.” But then Jesus went on to say, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words, they are equally important—they are virtually interchangeable! In effect, loving one's neighbor is how one expresses one's love of God. So, if Jesus could summarize the entirety of his own Judaic religion in this way, why should we think any different?

See how this also squares with the writings of the Apostle Paul, who was largely responsible for articulating many of the doctrines and dogmas that have defined Christianity for nearly 2000 years. In what is considered his great theological treatise—the Letter to the Romans—our text for today speaks to the heart of the matter:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This is the same emphasis Jesus made, even though in most churches today if anyone cites Romans, what gets emphasized is every “jot and tittle” of theological doctrine and speculative dogma that Paul expressed, as if that is far more essential to Christian beliefs than this! The tragic reality is, throughout the centuries, organized religion (not the least, Christianity) sheds more blood and sows more division in exploiting differences over doctrine and dogma than following the most essential purpose and value of our faith, i.e., to love God and to love our neighbors! So many have been misled to believe that the ultimate point of their religion is to secure their place in heaven that they have made faith a matter of self-preservation than a means of grace to cultivate compassion and love for others, which is its most fundamental purpose.

If you’re someone searching for a reason to believe or to explain to others why you are religious—why faith is important to you—I would suggest abandoning that old cliché line that it’s all about getting saved so you can live in eternity with God. I’ll trust Jesus on this one and say, I think God will address that when the time comes and that, in the meantime, while any of us are living this life, God has a much better reason for why religion should be relevant to our lives. Acting on the wisdom and teachings of our faith is an important way to get outside of our own heads for a while and cultivate empathy toward others while developing our consciences, our values, and our aspirations to align them with the ultimate purpose of valuing life by loving God and loving others.

If the entire witness of the Bible can be summarized into acting in ways that demonstrate love to others, then the reason for being religious is very straightforward and simple: we draw upon the wisdom of religion to help us be the very best we can be as loving, selfless, altruistic people—the

type who are compelled by empathy for the suffering and circumstances of others, particularly those who are victimized in life. We serve, we sacrifice, and we share because of the example of Jesus set and because we are compelled by love to be this way. We can't love others unless we care about them; we won't care about others if we lack empathy. This is why empathy is so important to cultivate in religion. That is a pretty good description of what I believe Jesus intended by a righteous life.

In these times, I find this to be a very significant calling and mission. You and I can be shining lights in a world that has so often become a callous place of deep darkness to many. Our rationale for religion isn't about keeping historic traditions going, or maintaining orthodox theology or beliefs, or even saving our own souls. Instead, it's about making the world a better place for people of all walks and circumstances—to do what we can to cultivate empathy and compassion, to serve and to nobly sacrifice when we are so called, and to build communities of caring people, especially for those in need. If we can do that, and keep our eyes on that prize, then we will have reason to gather each week, certain that God is pleased with our witness and work. Our satisfaction and happiness will flow from what we do for others, not from what we seek for ourselves. Because of what we and others do, the world will have that much more compassion, care, and spiritual enlightenment and harmony than it did before, just as the Guardian of our souls intends.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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