

May 20, 2020

I, Thou and us.

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

Ich und Du, usually translated as *I and Thou (You)*, is the title of a book by Martin Buber, first published in 1923. It's a classic work that was found on the bookshelves of many pastors of a certain age, including my dad. The key premise of the book is that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. In Buber's view, all of our relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou.

The title of that book has been poking into my consciousness of late as our society has been forced to confront the issue of how we balance individual rights with communal responsibilities in light of the Coronavirus. It came to mind this past week as I was watching a news report about two churches that were pushing to re-open their buildings and resume worship, though such mass gatherings were being discouraged by public health officials. Church members who were interviewed proclaimed their "constitutional right to the free exercise of religion", which they said trumped "any law of man" even if that law was aimed at protecting public health.

I and Thou. I thought of that book again this past week as I saw reports from my beloved home state of Michigan where hundreds gathered in a driving rainstorm to protest Governor Whitmer's stay at home order. Many came to the protest without masks and refused to maintain social distancing guidelines, bristling at the suggestion that government should mandate what they considered to be issues of "personal choice." Others were less passive and more aggressive with their messaging. A number of the protestors arrived wearing tactical gear and brandishing automatic weapons, looking as if they intended to undertake some sort of military coup to "liberate Lansing." Others carried confederate flags, waving them proudly as they mingled with the malcontent crowd.

At first glance, one might be hard pressed to find a direct linkage between public health policy, confederate flag waving and parading about with so-called assault weapons. But I think it was all of a piece. The protest itself, the disregarding of social distancing and face mask policies, the confederate flag waving and very public display of weaponry were all about one message: "I have my rights, and you (governor) can't tell me what to do." I have the right to bear arms, and you can't stop me. I have the right to assemble and you can't stop me. I have the right to free speech, so you can't stop me from carrying this confederate flag even if, as a symbol of systemic oppression and illegal insurrection, it should offend you. (Though, if memory serves, I am pretty sure that Michigan, bordering Canada as it does, was not part of the South's secessionist conspiracy.) It seems clear that these folks were chafing at the idea that individual rights should ever be abridged or subsumed even if the intent is to provide for the well being of the whole community.

There is very clear tension these days between individual rights and personal freedoms on one hand, and communal responsibilities and well being on the other. But this does not reflect some sort of new dynamic in American culture. It is, in fact, neither purely American, nor novel. Rather, the present circumstance has brought into more stark relief a fundamental tension that we all must negotiate in our lives with others.

My eldest daughter had this phrase she repeated often as child - a protest, really, against what she deemed to be parental overreach. "I am (Insert the number) years old, I can do whatever I want!" She proclaimed this freedom from parental hegemony from elementary school all the way through high school. The funny thing is that while she thought it and said it (a lot!) she was such a good kid that she never really acted on it; she did not ever actually end up "breaking bad". The statement, though, was a measure of maturity, or the lack thereof. Children are given to expressions of self-interest that evidence their inability to fully empathize with the other or evaluate the impact of their action upon others... or themselves. Usually, as years pass and we gain mature perspective; we begin to see that with individual freedom comes the concomitant responsibility to use that freedom to care for the other as well. Likewise, spiritual maturity means growing beyond a desire to exercise individual rights unhindered, to the full embrace of the responsibility to use ones gifts to bless and care for the other.

Plainly said, the fixation on the exercise of unabridged individual rights as over against the recognition of communal responsibilities is a distortion of the life together with others that God intends. And while the sense of entitlement to the expression of individual freedoms has a unique intensity among present day Americans, it is not unique to our culture or our time, and it was there way before the Coronavirus and stay at home orders and protestors chafing under governmental safety regulations. When I read the story of the descent of Adam and Eve into sin, I see the roots of this struggle even then. As I hear Adam and Eve contemplating the choice to defy God and to eat the forbidden fruit, I hear my sweet little daughter's voice, "I am x years old, and I can do whatever I want!"

One of the things that is particularly striking about the Biblical expression of ethical concerns is the affirmation that God is not only the source of ethical obligation but is in Godself the paradigm of such obligation. In the so-called Holiness code (Leviticus 19) the imitation of divine holiness is offered as the basis of human behavior. The basic injunction, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am Holy," undergirds the concern for economically vulnerable members of the community; obligations toward neighbors, hired laborers, and the physically handicapped; interfamilial relationships; and attitudes toward strangers. Acceptable human behavior was therefore "walking in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 11:22). The dialectical relation between humankind and God (I-Thou) in the prophets also exhibits divine righteousness and divine compassion as patterns to be emulated in the life of the community.

Of course, scripture also reveals that Jesus' life, ministry and death were all about communal responsibility and care for the other as over against the exercise of unfettered self-will. Though he had absolute power and total freedom, Jesus exercised that freedom by taking on the responsibility to bless the whole world. We see just that as he prays in the garden the night of his arrest asking if "This cup (of suffering) might pass from me" and then concluding the prayer, "nonetheless, not my will but thy will be done" (Luke 22:42). The same connection between

freedom and responsibility for others is found in Jesus' teaching, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,* will save it. (Mark 8:35) In Acts 3, we learn how the earliest church expressed the relationship between personal freedom and corporate responsibility as we read that the members of the church " held all things in common ... and distributed the proceeds to any as they had need." Paul spoke of the same sort of orientation toward communal blessing in 1 Corinthians 12:7, as he taught the church that each of them had been given gifts of the Holy Spirit, not for private enrichment, but "for the common good". (I-Thou and us!)

My intent here is not to downplay the concerns of those who are pushing hard to re-open our society and "get back to normal", nor is it to speak ill of those who express with intensity their love of freedom. I can understand what a huge threat this shutdown is for those whose livelihoods have been cut off, who can't pay the mortgage or feed their families. I cherish my constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, and the right to exercise them just as much as the next guy, and like many of the protestors, I hate being told what I have to do. (I am working on that!) I long for normalcy. I want to get out and do what I want, when I want, how I want, and with whom I want.

I love the freedom and the liberties we have in this country. They are great gifts that allow each of us the opportunity to live fully into the potential we've been given by our creator. But for the faithful Christian, these freedoms and liberties bring with them, huge responsibilities. As Jesus says, From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required;(Luke 12:48) The question is, then, Will we use those freedoms to the fullest extent to bless and care for the other, and thus, to love and honor God?

I will close with a few words from Karyn Kedar's book, "God Whispers: Stories of the Soul, Lesson of the Heart". Community comes from the word "common." The word assumes an awareness that we share in the most basic ways: tears, loss, love, illness, joy, fear, birth, death, life. We are not meant to live alone. We are not supposed to ignore or deny what we have in common as human beings. That is the power of community. It is the acknowledgment of the universals of life, the sameness, the common ground. It is the knowledge that I will never be alone when I am sick; that I can share the mixed emotions I will have when my children go away to college, that when I pray for the secret desires of my soul, I will be joined by others doing the same. I live amid strangers, acquaintances, friends, and even a few people whom I don't like. What makes us a community is the sense of shared responsibility: when one is in need, the other simply responds.

When she was a kid, my daughter used to say, "I am __ years old! I can do whatever I want!" The question is what will you and I say now that we've grown to spiritual adulthood? May our lives reflect a deep understanding that this world is as much about "us", as it is about "me." And may we be blessed with the awareness that all of our relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou.

Pastor Brown