

“Trolley Problems: Where is my Neighbor?”

A Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Sunday

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A reading from Aesop, “The Lion and the Boar”

ON A SUMMER DAY, when the great heat induced a general thirst among the beasts, a Lion and a Boar came at the same moment to a small well to drink. They fiercely disputed which of them should drink first, and were soon engaged in the agonies of a mortal combat.

When they stopped suddenly to catch their breath for a more fierce renewal of the fight, they saw some Vultures waiting in the distance to feast on the one that should fall first.

They at once made up their quarrel, saying, "It is better for us to make friends, than to become the food of Crows or Vultures."

One

A trolley is out of control, running down a track. On the track ahead are five people, tied to the track by a mad psychologist. Thank goodness, you are standing by a switch. If you flip the switch, the trolley will change tracks, saving the five people. Unfortunately, the mad psychologist has tied a single person to that track. Should you flip the switch?

Those of you who keep up with developments in psychology or ethics know that this scenario is called “The Trolley Problem.” The Trolley Problem presents us with a simple ethical dilemma: Are we willing to become personally involved in the deliberate killing of another human being in order to save five human beings, or are we more likely to choose inaction, choosing to blame the mad psychologist for tying people to the trolley tracks to begin with? The problems go on: Would you be willing to PUSH a person onto the tracks to stop the trolley? And imagine this: you are walking down the hall of a hospital. You know of five people who need organ transplants to survive. And there, walking toward you, is a perfectly healthy person with fine organs. Do you kill that person in order to harvest the organs?

Harvard psychologist Marc Hauser has been working with variations of the trolley problem with various human populations around the globe and in his book Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong, Hauser proposes that human beings have a genetic, hard-wired sense of moral decency. A sense of moral decency developed not by culture or religion but by evolution itself. Hauser’s thesis greatly upsets the conventionally religious; but I believe it argues for hope, not despair, at the future for humanity. Human beings have innate, hardwired, ethical understand. And in my humble opinion it takes bad religion to mess that up.

It takes bad religion to convince innately moral young people to blow themselves and others up. It takes bad religion to convince innately moral herders that it’s OK to exterminate farmers in Darfur.

It took bad religion to make us during the Cold War hate “godless Communists” so much that we built a nuclear arsenal that could destroy the planet. . .over a disagreement concerning economics!

It takes a hateful, tribal god to circumvent the innate moral sense of humanity.

Human beings have posed the sorts of morality scenarios presented by the Trolley Problem for a long time. Probably the most famous moral scenario occurs in Christian scripture, the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10 verses 25-37, to be specific. For those who don't know your Christian all that well, this is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In the set-up to this parable Jesus has been talking with an expert on Jewish law who has just agreed with him that central to the law is the command "Love your neighbor as yourself." The law expert responds by asking who his neighbor is. Jesus responds with this parable:

A man is robbed and beaten and left by the side of the road half dead. Two members of the priestly class pass him by, not helping because of ritual purity concerns (another case of bad religion!). A Samaritan, who practiced a form of Judaism not acceptable to the legal expert, helped the man. Jesus asks the expert a simple question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replies, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus responds by saying, "Go and do likewise."

The reading this morning, Aesop fable of the lion and the boar, is an example of enlightened self interest—agreement will avoid the vultures. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the Trolley Problem pose to us larger questions of empathy and altruism and community:

Who is my neighbor?

Where is my community?

What are we to do in the face of human suffering?

Who am I willing to throw under the trolley. . . or the bus. . .and for what purpose?

Today we celebrate the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, a group that offers a radical vision of just who our neighbors are...

Two.

Allow me three examples:

The genocide in Darfur is the first of what will become a pattern in the face of global climate change. Traditionally nomadic tribes have been forced, by drought and desertification, into lands owned by people different from themselves in culture and tradition. Since the genocide began in 2003, 400,000 human beings have died and 2.5 million have been displaced.

The government of Sudan is complicit in these killings. Sudan has oil reserves, but seventy percent of the oil revenues go to fund the military. Roughly one million people remain on the land, but those numbers drop by approximately 100,000 every month. The main source of sustenance for the refugees in Sudan and neighboring Chad are non-governmental organizations such as the UUSC, which are increasingly coming under attack (savedarfur.org).

Are the people of Darfur our neighbors?

The UUSC has also been involved in New Orleans, USA. The UUSC reports that,

Forty percent of the people displaced by Hurricane Katrina are tenants. Since the storm, rents have doubled and apartment buildings, even those undamaged by the storm, remain off limits. Ninety-six percent of funds for government housing aid go to homeowners (uusc.org).

Undocumented workers are cleaning and rebuilding New Orleans. Yet, often, when it comes time to pay them, rumors of immigration sweeps send them into hiding. And so they don't get paid (uusc.org) .

After all these months and years, only thirteen of twenty six hospitals are open in New Orleans. Only eighty three of two hundred seventy six public schools are open. Public transportation is at fifty percent of pre-Katrina capacity. (http://uspolitics.about.com/od/katrina/l/bl_katrina_stats.htm)

Last year there were three full-time therapists in New Orleans. Now there are twenty two. For a traumatized population of 600,000 people.

Are the people of New Orleans our neighbors?

Three.

Here's one closer to home, one the UUSC is not involved in but that we here should be.

If you own an older home, have you read your property deed lately? Allow me to read some samples:

"The parties... agree each with the others that no part of the lands owned by them shall ever be used or occupied by or sold, conveyed, leased, rented or given to Negroes or any person of Negro blood."

"No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or any Asiatic race..."

"No property or building shall be owned or occupied by the colored race, except such buildings as may be constructed by the owners and residents of the property, for the use of their servants."

"No person or persons of Asiatic, African or Negro blood, lineage or extraction shall be permitted to occupy a portion of said property, or any building thereon, except domestic servant or servants may be actually and in good faith employed by white occupants of said premises."

"No person of other than the Caucasian race shall use or occupy any building or lot except as servants domesticated with any owner or tenant."

"A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."

(Source: <http://www.answers.com/topic/restrictive-covenant?cat=biz-fin>)

Fortunately, sisters and brothers, thanks to the Fair Housing Act of 1968, all the words I just read are now illegal. Unfortunately, we still live in the shadow of those words. Yes, those were the bad old days, but. . .

Barak Obama, in his recent speech on race, wisely quoted William Faulkner: "The past is not dead. It's not even past."

Who are our neighbors? Who are NOT our neighbors? And why?

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

"Rabbi, the one who had mercy on him."

"Go and do likewise."

The Talmud tells of a gentile who approached the rabbi Hillel, who lived a generation before Jesus, and said: "Convert me but teach me the entire Torah as I stand on one foot." Hillel said, "That which you hate, don't do to others. That is the entire Torah. The rest is only commentary. Go and learn it!"

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee helps us learn that lesson.

Martha Sharp and her husband the Reverend Waitstill Sharp helped found the Unitarian Service Committee during the Second World War. On their first trip to Europe they beat the Nazis to Prague, Czechoslovakia by one month, where they helped Europe's growing refugee population. For that, they got on the Gestapo's Most Wanted List.

Undeterred by that distinction, they went to occupied France, where they helped hundreds of people escape. Martha Sharp was particularly adept at distracting Nazi attention as people crossed borders with falsified documents. Reverend and Mrs. Sharp are two of only three US citizens to be designated "Righteous Among Nations" for saving human beings from the Nazi Holocaust.

Who were the neighbors of Reverend and Mrs. Sharp?

Apparently they had to go to Nazi-occupied Europe to find their neighbors.

It is a proud tradition.

Who are our neighbors?

Service and community. As many of you know the flaming chalice, symbol of Unitarian Universalism, originated as a symbol used by the Unitarian Service Committee. The original chalice was drawn by an Austrian refugee, Hans Deutsch, a man in mortal danger for drawing un-flattering cartoons of Adolf Hitler.

It is a noble tradition. On this Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Sunday, we honor that tradition. And we dedicate ourselves to that tradition.

Sisters and Brothers, we live in a world in which the population of Darfur is being exterminated.

We live in a nation in which the city of New Orleans has lost eighty percent of its African-American population

(http://www.boston.com/news/local/rhode_island/articles/2006/01/26/study_new_orleans_could_lose_80_percent_of_black_population/).

We live in a community which is ninety percent Euro-American
(<http://www.muninetguide.com/states/missouri/municipality/Kirkwood.php>).

We live in a nation in which one in ten people live in poverty. We live in a nation in which one in seven people have no health insurance.

We live in a world in which seventy-one per cent of women live in poverty, half of those on less than two dollars a day.

Who are our neighbors?

Who are our sisters and brothers?

One last trolley problem. Say you're driving down the road. You've just bought a new car with white leather seats. And there, by the side of the road, is a girl who has wrecked her bicycle. She will bleed on your brand new seats. Will you spend the money to have them cleaned in order to take the girl to the hospital and save her life?

Let's say a girl is dying in Darfur. Or New Orleans. You will never see her but you know that a check to UUSC will save her life. Do you write the check?

What would we have done to us?

How do we wish to be treated?

With privilege comes responsibility.

Join UUSC.

Roll up your sleeves.

Help your neighbor.

Expand your neighborhood until it includes everyone.

So may it be.

Sources:

www.savedarfur.org

www.uusc.org

Marc D. Hauser, Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong.