



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: October 4, 2009

Widening Our Circle of Compassion, Robert B. Culp

Genesis 4:1-9; 1 Corinthians 12 (Selections)

One of the stories William Sloane Coffin was fond of telling, not only in his capacity as Yale's Chaplain and Riverside's preacher but also as an extraordinarily articulate peace activist, has to do with "the hundredth monkey." And it's a story that has profound implications for us in the faith community, especially on this World Communion Sunday.

A certain kind of Japanese monkey has been observed now for almost 60 years. Back in 1952 on the island of Koshima, researchers were providing the monkeys with sweet potatoes that had been dropped in the sandy soil. Not too surprisingly, the researchers noted that the monkeys liked the taste of raw sweet potatoes, but they seemed to find the taste of dirt unpleasant. An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother; and her playmates also learned this new way of eating sweet potatoes, and they taught their mothers as well.

Gradually, this cultural innovation was picked up by various monkeys before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this social improvement. All the other adults kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes. Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes – the exact number is not known. Let's suppose that when the sun rose one morning, there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let's further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash her sweet potatoes.

It was then that it happened! By that evening, almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough! But the most surprising thing observed by these researchers was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea – colonies

of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys began washing their sweet potatoes!

Now, you may well wonder why I am telling you this story this morning.

Well, I do not believe it is far from the mark to say that it is the high calling of every Christian to be, if not the first, at least that hundredth monkey – the one that provides the breakthrough, the one who shows that things can change for the better, the one who dispels the destructive lie by replacing it with a life enhancing truth, demonstrating the amazing phenomenon that if enough of us become aware of something, all of us will become aware of it, and do something about it.

When you look around in our world today to find the equivalent of the unwashed sweet potatoes, there are plenty of likely candidates. Destructive cycles of unattended poverty. Poor medical hygiene, and too many millions who have no health care. Fears, distrust, and deep-seated insecurities that lead to crippling patterns of saber-rattling within a war-weary world. The AIDS epidemic and the bane of illiteracy and stubborn traditions and norms that contribute to this blight, especially in Africa.

And there is also the age-old pattern of separatism. Somehow, we habitually perceive and act toward one another out of a deep feeling of separateness, which is illustrated by Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" with its implied answer, "No, I am not my brother's keeper – let alone a brother to some stranger."

Separatism, well-chronicled by sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Robert Wuthnow, is "me-ism" in its individual, corporate, and national forms. Separatism sees nature "red in tooth and claw," and war as the natural, expected state of human affairs. Separatism has been described as a "gladiatorial" view of the world, because the line from separateness to violence is short and direct. As the story of Cain and Abel illustrates, all violence stems from seeing others as alien, from counting the interests of others as inconsequential compared to the importance of our own. But as James Baldwin saw so clearly: "It is a terrible, and an inexorable law, that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own."

The apostle Paul envisioned a very different model of human relationships. Far from denying kinship, as Cain's question framed the matter, Paul affirms it in a glorious metaphor: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the hand to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

Far from the gladiatorial view of the world, Paul's model is a holistic way of seeing things. It is not me against you, but me and you against whatever evil seeks to divide us. If we are husband and wife, then it's you and me against the intruder: estrangement or loneliness or distrust. If we are black or white, then it's you and me against the lies of segregation and preju-

dice. It's not nation against nation, but nations together against the common enemies of war and conflict, and the lack of justice and peace ... which is something the United Nations seeks to address, but which far too many nations are proud to ignore. According to the holistic view, we appear to be separate, but we are, in fact, one.

Einstein put it this way: "A human being is a part of the whole called by us the 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Our Jewish brothers and sisters who celebrated their most holy day this past week, Yom Kippur, hold fast to the belief that if one saves a single soul, it is as if one had saved the world; and if one kills a single soul, it is as if one had slain the entire world. That is an expression of the holistic view of life. In past times, Jewish people used to be very careful never to step single piece of paper, lest the name of God be written on it. Likewise, we must be careful not to tread on a single soul, for we know there is "that of God" ... something divine ... in every person.

The hundredth monkey showed that things can change for the better, which is very fortunate for us, because sadly the most prosperous nation in the world is also among its most violent. The incidence of murder in San Francisco is 400 times greater than it is in Tokyo; and the almost 61 million citizens of Great Britain kill each other less often than do the 1.6 million inhabitants of Manhattan.

And what can we possibly say about the heart-wrenching incidents of domestic violence, whose terrible stories come at us new and unabated every single week?

I wonder if it isn't time that we started to wash the sand off our sweet potatoes? I wonder if it isn't time that we abandoned me-ism in all its forms, and started to promote peace and justice in the most fundamental fashion possible: namely, by affirming in all people their God-given dignity? As Einstein reminds us, "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion."

William Sloane Coffin writes, "World Communion Sunday is a reminder that salvation may be personal, but it is never private or exclusive. Salvation is for everyone – including you and me. It's a reminder that divisions in the church are sinful, for only Christians united in love can show a divided world how to live in peace. The message of this Sunday answers Cain's question as to whether he is his brother's keeper by affirming, 'No, you are not his keeper, for you are your brother's brother, your sister's sister.'"

You see, human unity is not something you and I are called on to create, only to recognize. God made us one, and Christ lived and shared his life to keep us that way. What we need to embody as followers of the way of Jesus Christ is the daily, steadfast effort to stop trying to put asunder what God has joined together.

So let us now gather around Christ's table, so that (in the words of an old communion liturgy) "having supped with him and with each other, with hearts made warm and wills made strong again through bread and cup," we may resolve to be, if not the first, at least that hundredth monkey, who can dispel a destructive lie by replacing it with a life enhancing truth, and can show the others what a true feast of love life has in store for all of us.