

“God’s Eco System: Attention to the Parts Makes the Whole”

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I have a riddle for you this morning. What weighs 2,000 pounds and keeps bees alive? What is covered with fur and has bird nests? Give up? A bison. And bison are being talked about these days in Minnesota, not in nostalgic or academic way, but in real life and real time. Talked about by people who are trying to re-create a viable Minnesota prairie eco-system. For all the grand visions and hopes to have acres of wild flowers, waving grasses, song birds and pollinating bees, it turns out that it’s 2,000 pound furry, horned mammals that are the keystone to make such visions and hopes possible. Leaving out a key part means the whole won’t hold. It’s the bison who keep the grasses in check - limiting potential prairie fires. It’s the bison who wallow and pack down vegetation thus exposing new soil to sun and seeds. Who would have thought? Well, until recently no body did. It took 150 years without paying attention to the absence of bison to get that all the smaller residents of a prairie landscape need them. Attention to the parts makes the whole. Attention to the whole means attention to the parts. That’s seems like that’s the way it is with this natural world God has created.

Life, at its basic and at its loftiest, to exist and thrive, is an intertwined system, a web, systems within systems, sub-wholes and parts.

In scientific terminology, such a created arrangement of life is called “holon” and a “holoarchy”, words meaning simultaneously a whole and a part. In the words of one scientist: “...in a holoarchy each person’s value comes from his or her individuality and uniqueness **and** the capacity to engage and interact with others to make the fruits of that uniqueness available.” (David Spangler, quote from *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, Ilia Delia, page 35)

And in Christian theology, such an understanding and definition of the scientific term “holon” could be called the Kingdom of God, God’s realm, the Kingdom of Heaven. For centuries in Hebrew and Christian scripture, stories, prophetic visions, descriptions of communities, and by Jesus himself, lay out wholes with attention to the parts. That kingdom we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer appears to be a universal pattern. Those in the center are to care about those on the edges. People with plenty are to share with those who have needs. Everyone is to have a place at the table - and on the table is a feast, enough to provide daily bread and celebrations with wine. Doesn’t that sound like a holoarchy” “each person’s value comes from his or her individuality and uniqueness **and** the capacity to engage and interact with others to make the fruits of that uniqueness available.”?

Said in different words, isn’t that what Joseph is saying to his brothers when they stood before him in Egypt? They had come to beg for forgiveness for their past act of selling him into slavery. And those individual actions mattered. They were not insignificant. Yet, Joseph was able to hold them inside a larger whole. Taken all together, Joseph could see his brothers actions not as intending harm, but interacting with other actions and “numerous people”, making “fruits of that uniqueness available.” “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is

doing today. So have no fear,; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” God’s vision for the common good.

The apostle Paul has different words in talking with his community and in his letter this morning, Paul is also concerned about the parts. Differing opinions have apparently led to quarreling. Who’s eating what? Who’s abstaining? Which days are most holy? All important aspects of communal life, Paul implies. Each position is unique and has value Paul writes. Still, Paul is concerned about the state of the whole. Without the “capacity to engage and interact with others”, Christ’s life-giving gifts can not as easily be present in the whole. In Paul’s words: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so the, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” God’s common good, God’s realm: a holon, simultaneously a part and a whole.

And in the gospel, Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven, but he’s prompted by Peter’s wondering about how to manage his relationships in a community. Peter is asking Jesus how two people deal with hurt between them. And Peter wants to know how many times he should individually have to take care of separations in the whole. As many as 7 times? Peter comes to Jesus with a particular situation involving two people so Peter must think that individual, unique relationships are important. Important enough to push the number of accepting forgiveness up to 7 times. Of course, Jesus’s response tells us how much more important individual, unique relationships are - 77x which means of endless value. Jesus could have stopped there. He has given Peter his answer to how often to forgive.

But individual and unique relationships are not only Jesus’ concern. Jesus adds “...For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” In that sentence, Jesus has linked and expanded Peter’s focus on one relationship to a story about a community. This parable, I believe, is a powerful example of a holoarchy, in which everything and everyone in the story is both a part and whole at the same time.

In the twisting threads and shifting details of this parable’s plot, Jesus invites us to grasp God’s vision of the common good, the kingdom of heaven, the parts and the whole. While we can parse out the separate characters and actions, they do not tell the complete story. And while the story ends with the challenge of Jesus’ words about our individual capacity and willingness to forgive, the parable also leaves us with a message of how individuals and a community as a whole are necessary to right the situation.

However, in the end, you and I don’t live in the holon and holoarchy of Joseph’s Egypt, Paul’s Rome or Jesus’ Palestine. We are living in Minnesota and America in the 21st century world. Imagining our story as a holoarchy presents a challenge. Yet, this is a task facing us as Christians. For all the various voices and perspectives demanding our attention, it’s possible to find Jesus’. He was always clear that “each person’s value comes from his or hers individuality and uniqueness **and** the capacity to engage and interact with others to make the fruits of that uniqueness available.” Jesus lived and died inviting people to see and live into God’s kingdom. Jesus always invited his followers to grasp the whole and value the parts in their own unique story. That part is not the riddle. But we are left with figuring out exactly what parts are missing, what connections aren’t working and what will bring justice, dignity, value and fruits to our holoarchy. Yet, God’s creation and vision for the common good is not possible without us becoming engaged and find the answers. Amen.