

There But For Fortune

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Ancient Witness: Matthew 25:34-40

Last month, Elon Musk, the richest man in the world and head of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), said, “the fundamental weakness of western civilization is empathy.” In the interview, he went on to say that the “empathy response” is a “bug” in our civilization that people are exploiting. This is the person who is responsible for dismantling USAID that helps to the poorest people on earth, and for cutting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid that keep millions of people from falling into poverty. These actions will, no doubt, lead to countless deaths and immeasurable suffering. And he had the gall to call those who benefit from federal programs that he is slashing “the parasite class.” Meanwhile, Musk’s companies alone, such as Tesla and SpaceX, have received \$38 billion of tax-payer money in subsidies, tax breaks, loans and the like, according to the Washington Post.

And there have been some so-called Evangelicals who actually say now that it is unchristian to be empathetic! One popular book is actually titled, “Empathy is a Sin.” I’m not kidding!

This morning I want to talk about the importance of empathy as followers of Jesus. Now, empathy is not just a feeling, but it is an actual experience of the other. When I empathize I see that the humanity of others is linked to my humanity. Empathy challenges individualism by asking us to relate to the experiences of those who suffer. It has been condemned through the years as being “economically inefficient” because it stands in the way of the brutality of pure market forces that go unchecked.

The famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead once said that the first sign of civilization is a healed femur. In the animal kingdom, a broken leg was a death sentence. But a healed femur indicates someone cared for the injured person, providing food, shelter and protection until the bone healed. Evidence of such care for the sick and injured goes back over 1.5 million years. She suggested that compassion, cooperation and concern for the well-being for others were foundational for civilization and enabled humans to survive as a species. So the real threat to civilization is not empathy, but its absence.

Three years ago, we witnessed with horror the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. The unprovoked war against the nation of Ukraine. It is a war still being wages by Russia. It’s hard to imagine the terror that the people of that country must feel, as tank roll into the cities with troops, missiles, helicopters and bombs.

The poem, “September 1, 1939,” was written by W.H. Auden in response to Germany’s invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II. “All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie,” he wrote. It is a lie that authoritarianism is better than democracy, a lie that might makes right, a lie that empathy is a sin, lies that have recently gained a foothold in our own country. To counter the lies of aggression and conquest, Auden called for solidarity and unity:

*There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police,
We must love one another or die.*

And I have been remembering a famous saying by John Bradford, a sixteenth century English reformer, who was executed by Queen Mary or “Bloody Mary,” as the Protestants called her. He once saw a group of prisoners being led to execution and was heard to say, “There but for the grace of God go I.” This quote, often repeated through the years, is taken to mean that we should always care about those who are oppressed or who suffer, because it could be us. It should *matter* to us. I like the phrase, “there but for fortune” better, because it doesn’t imply that God is responsible for who is suffering and who isn’t. In the classic folk song by Phil Ochs, he sang,

*Show me the country where bombs had to fall,
Show me the ruins of buildings once so tall,
And I'll show you a young land with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or go I, you and I.*

And so, I suggest that we look upon Ukraine not with pity, but with empathy. Let us say, “There but for fortune go you and I.”

But this way of viewing the world does not come naturally. It is counter-cultural. The human tendency is to view the world through the eyes of the winners, not the losers. It is to constantly, unconsciously compare ourselves with the who have more. The American Dream is all about looking up and not looking down. It is about upward mobility. It is about identifying with the winners. And this myth says that anybody can make it, anybody can succeed, if they just put their shoulder to the wheel and work hard enough. The author John Steinbeck was reported to have once said, “Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”

But identifying with those who have more—more money, more success, more prestige, better health—this leads to a permanent state of dissatisfaction. It leads to a pathological, anti-social and insatiable desire for more and more at the expense of others.

In a study by the Economic Policy Institute (“State of Working America, 12th Ed.), they looked at intergenerational elasticity in different developed countries. Of all the developed nations, the U.S. had one of the highest elasticity quotients of .47, meaning it has the least social mobility and one is less likely of moving up in the U.S. Whereas countries such as Denmark and Norway have elasticity of .15 and .17 and therefore much higher social mobility. One could say that the mythic “American Dream” is much more alive there than here!

In a recent study by Michael Carr and Emily Wiemers from the University of Massachusetts (2016), they conclude:

It is increasingly the case that no matter what your educational background is, where you start has become increasingly important for where you end...

The probability of ending where you start has gone up, and the probability of moving up from where you start has gone down.

Yet, the common saying is more like, “There but for my own hard work go I.” Or “There but for my own ingenuity, or there but for how good I am.”

Research has shown that believing in meritocracy makes people more selfish, less self-critical, more prone to act in discriminatory ways and more indifferent to the plight of the poor. For the super-wealthy, the narrative of meritocracy says that they deserve all their money because of hard work and effort, while others do not. Remembering the role of luck, on the other hand, increases generosity.

The meritocracy fiction also masks the transmission of wealth and privilege across generations. As Ann Richards famously said about George W. Bush, “He was born on third base and thought that he hit a triple!” This myth has the winners taking their good fortune as evidence of their merit, hard work and superiority. But as George Monbiot (MON-bee-oh) once wrote: “If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.”

And it also stigmatizes the losers. Poverty becomes a character flaw, a sign of immorality. People, in this narrative, are poor because they are lazy. Therefore they are undeserving of compassion. Ronald Reagan’s infamous term, “welfare queen,” blames the poor for their lack of hard work. They are merely gaming the system. Parasites! Shame is a strong aspect to the meritocracy myth. Meritocracy is a justification of the status quo and obscures privilege, racism, sexism and the injustices in society.

But the saying, “There but for fortune go I” is so urgently important from a spiritual perspective. Jesus, of course, identified with the lowest in society, the nobodies. He was constantly looking down, not up. In Matthew 25, he told a parable about the coming Son of Man, a title he often used for himself:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

This is the path of Jesus, the path of not of perpetual dissatisfaction and striving but of peace and wholeness. Identifying not with the wealthy and comfortable and successful, but with the poor, the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned is not just the moral and ethical path. It is also the path that delivers us from false pride and lack of empathy. It can change our hearts. And isn't this what we seek? Isn't this the primary spiritual task?

You know it's interesting that almost all the books that they want to ban are about stepping into someone else's shoes and seeing the world through oppressed or marginalized eyes. They are about putting ourselves, if only for a moment, in the world of "the least of these brothers and sisters" of ours. They are about developing empathy. And empathy is dangerous to those who desire to dominate and subjugate others.

And so, may we be mindful always of our good fortune, the advantages of the time and nation and family into which we happen to have been born, the privileges granted to us. May we look continually to those who are not more fortunate with envy. But may our practice be to look to those who are less fortunate—those who are experiencing hunger and famine, those who are experiencing the indiscriminate violence of war, those born in hopeless poverty. May it be our practice to look to those with compassion and say, "There but for fortune go I."