

A Prescription for All the “isms” that Divide Us

Most everyone knows the saying, “Charity begins at home.” It is a salient reminder that there’s something incongruous, if not impossible, about extending love to strangers or persons with whom one is not personally acquainted if one has not shown love to family and neighbors.

How do we learn to love if not by loving those closest to us? That doesn’t mean that we need love them only and disregard others, but that in our efforts to love those we know we gain the knowledge, understanding, and capacity to love others as well.

How unfortunate that our stock of common wisdom does not also contain the saying, “Critique begins at home.” Psychologists have repeatedly discovered that we are much more inclined to give ourselves a pass, or to indulge and overlook our own shortcomings, while finding fault in others. Our vision and judgment are typically biased in favor of ourselves and against those who differ from us.

One of the teachings of Jesus is directly applicable to this circumstance. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus needles, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not see the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” [Matt 7:3-5].

The religious case for adding “Critique begins at home” to our stock of common wisdom is further strengthened by the words of such great prophets of ancient Israel as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea. Their words of critique, judgment and denunciation were not directed chiefly at other peoples and nations but at their own people, the people of Israel and Judah. As they saw it, God was deeply grieved that those who counted themselves to be God’s chosen people were becoming faithless, unjust, and hardened in their hearts. From their vantage point, many of Israel’s and Judah’s misfortunes were tantamount to divine judgment upon them. Indeed, other peoples and nations might be seen as the instruments of this judgment.

The prophetic tradition in Judaism and Christianity is not solely about critique and judgment. It is also often about hope and promise, about redemption and deliverance. Indeed, in one passage in Isaiah the instrument of God’s deliverance is none other than Cyrus of Persia (present-day Iran), who is declared to be God’s anointed one, or messiah.

The great prophets are not partisan hacks. They see the big picture of human events and world affairs. They are not chauvinists who regard their own people as exceptional, or as people especially deserving God’s indulgence and favor, If anything, the prophets hold their own people to a higher standard. Jesus reportedly taught, “To whom much is given, much shall be required.” In this vein, both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus understood that the greater the blessings that had come their way, the greater their obligation to be faithful, loving, and just.

If only we could hold ourselves to standards as high, if not higher, than the standards to which we hold others! The worst of all the “isms” in the world might then be eliminated. No one would

think more highly of him- or herself due to race, color, gender, nationality, religion, or any other accident of birth or attribute of circumstance.

If critique began at home, no more arrogance and pride of status. What a wonderful world that would be!

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