

Enlarged hearts (Mark 8:27-38)

What does it mean to have a Savior?

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“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus addresses this question to his first followers, and he addresses it to us. Like the disciples, we might come up with a variety of answers. But even if we, with Peter, speak of Jesus as Messiah and Savior, our response is the beginning and not the end of a theological, spiritual, and ethical journey. It’s a journey guided by questions such as, Is our image of *Savior* one of someone who sanctions our ideas of power and prestige? Or does it invite us to consider the cost of discipleship and redefine the nature of power and relationships in our personal, congregational, and political lives?

One of my spiritual mentors, process theologian Bernard Loomer, believed that theological reflection is worthless if it lacks intellectual, emotional, and spiritual *stature*. In his influential essay “S-I-Z-E is the Measure,” Loomer explains:

By size I mean the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness.

Loomer was clear that the future of a church, nation, or planet depends on the cultivation of large-souled pastors, business leaders, and politicians. Sadly, it seems that many leaders instead race to constrict their worldview, imagination, and sense of responsibility for others.

The Buddhist tradition speaks of the bodhisattva as a person of stature. Bodhisattvas postpone their entry into Nirvana to return to Earth with the mission of bringing enlightenment to every wayward soul. In similar fashion, the New Testament speaks of the youthful Jesus growing in wisdom and stature and favor with God and humankind. Spiritual growth means opening to greater suffering—not just for Jesus and the bodhisattva, but for us. As we grow spiritually, we move from apathy to empathy. Other people’s pain becomes our pain; other people’s joy becomes our joy. As Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12, we suffer together or rejoice together.

Christian formation promotes large-spirited people. Stunted spiritualities and theologies are not an option in today’s world. Moreover, in a world that privileges comfort and success, the church needs to encourage people to suffer creatively—that is, to embrace suffering in light of growing spiritual maturity. The prophetic message, embodied in Jesus, Amos, Hosea, and others, involves sensitivity to God’s suffering in the suffering of creation. God is not apathetic. Aseity, or self-sufficiency, does not describe the God of the prophets or Jesus Christ. As philosopher Charles Hartshorne averred, God is the “most moved mover.” God’s love is unwavering, but divine love plunges God into the maelstrom of creaturely suffering.

As I wrote this piece, I looked at my television screen and was transfixed by the continuing suffering of people in Puerto Rico, U.S. citizens victimized by race-based national neglect. I am stunned at the apathy of many Christian leaders in light of the trauma created by our government’s intentional separation of immigrant children from their parents and its policy regarding refugee resettlement. Caught up in nation-first theology and seduced by individualistic theologies, they have turned their backs on the Bible they claim is inerrant and have privileged law and order and security over compassion. They—and we—forget that our small theologies and equally small circles of concern will lead, according to the prophet Amos, to a famine of hearing God’s word (Amos 8:11-12).

Empathy is a spiritual and ethical virtue at the heart of our faith, and our congregations are challenged not just to talk about expanding the circles of

empathy—and experiencing the suffering of others—but to find ways for congregants to face others' suffering without emotionally shutting down or experiencing burnout. Some days the pain of the world is just too much to fathom, and we need spiritual anchors to strengthen us for the long haul—along with the immediate pain and suffering we encounter in responding to “the least of these.”

Spiritual practices undergird social action. Accordingly, socially active congregations must make spiritual practices essential to their mission. There is no division between prayer and protest, between spirituality and social concern. Contemplation deepens our spirits and broadens our sensitivities. Action expands the scope of our spiritual sensitivity. And God can enlarge our hearts to see God's presence in every human and all creation, and to respond with grace and compassion.