

**TOGETHER WE GROW: PARTNERS IN MISSION AND OUTREACH
JAMES 5:13-20; MARK 9:38-50; SEPTEMBER 27, 2009; THY/WPC**

The *New York Times Magazine* reported recently a study that began as an inquiry into the social causes of obesity and identified the remarkable impact people have on one another. The study focused on large groups of people over a period of years. It claimed that behaviors like eating, drinking and smoking and feelings like happiness and unhappiness move in waves among groups of people.

The study discovered that a behavior or mood of one person can be conducted through another person into another cluster of individuals—a family or group of friends—with whom the first person has no contact. For example, behavior like overeating is like dropping a stone into a pond; it ripples outward and moves the water all the way at the pond's edge.

All sorts of verbal/nonverbal and conscious/unconscious signals affect expectations that are like switches for behaviors and mood. Comedians and cartoonists have had a field day with this. One cartoon pictures two women in a restaurant looking at a menu. They both say to the waiter, "She'll have a dry salad with a cup of water."

The implications of this research interest the NIH as well as retailers and politicians of course. On the one hand we find that we are physically and emotionally affected by the behavior and attitudes of others from whom we are far removed – 3 degrees of separation the research says. But on the other hand we have the capacity to affect the lives of others whom we do not even know – as many as 1,000 people per individual.

For organizations like public health agencies or churches this is significant news. Actually, maybe it isn't news at all but documentation for something that we have known all along.

The sacred texts of the world's great religions extol the interconnectedness of the human family, indeed of all of creation. We do not live or act in a vacuum. No man is an island, said the poet; all are part of the main.

Yet, we live in a society that thrives on the rights of individuals to do or say what they please as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else – which we are finding may be fiction.

We want to stand out or stand alone – on our own terms. Our iPod culture allows us to create hermetically sealed worlds of visual and sound stimuli to plug into anytime, anywhere. I'm not suggesting we turn in our iPods.

I am suggesting on this day when we lift up the mission and outreach of this congregation and also consider ways in which we can grow our faith, our church and our community, that we take to heart how far-reaching and important even the small acts of one person can be.

Both of this morning's readings speak to this powerful awareness.

Maybe that's the reason Jesus seems so severe in his condemnation of behavior that causes others, especially children or those new to the faith, to stumble or fall.

Be responsible for your actions. Think first. Measure twice, cut once as the carpenters say, resources and lives are precious and limited.

But just as Jesus is severe in condemning his followers' behavior that leads others astray; he widens the circle of his movement to include those who are acting in ways that support his mission and ministry.

When John says to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us," Jesus responds, "do not stop him; for whoever is not against us is for us."

Apparently, Jesus thinks it is more important to do good deeds – like casting out demons – than it is to be a part of his little band of followers. "Whoever gives a cup of water will not lose the reward," he says. Acts of generosity and charity have their own reward. They do not need the blessing of a particular group like the Presbyterian Church.

In a world where religious extremism places "following us" above good deeds and acts of charity this is an important antidote to the fragmentation and violence the global community currently suffers.

It might also serve as a poignant nudge or reason for congregations, like the Presbyterian churches in the city of Buffalo, and other clusters of mainline churches where resources are precious and limited, to buck the "follow us" tradition of going it alone as single congregations and find ways to work together.

If our theme this morning and throughout this fall is, "Together We Grow" I would suggest that reaching out to forge meaningful partnerships is not something that would be nice if it happened or if we got around to it, but an essential ingredient to faithful ministry.

Westminster does a decent job. We partner with Jews and Muslims and have opened the doors of our mission to any who are interested including WEDI, work trips to the Gulf, youth trips to Maine, most recently to Gowanda.

But sometimes I ask myself who's missing from the table. Where are the evangelicals, small churches, suburban churches, other mainline congregations? Where are people of other socio-economic levels? Where are the entrenched poor and chronically unemployed? Children and youth of poverty?

I don't mean to say that we can have partnerships with all of these groups and indeed in our own way we impact the lives of many in these groups whom we do not know and will never meet. But if we are talking about breaking out of our little cocoon, widening the circle, bringing down the barriers then it might mean that we need to find ways to reach out to and welcome others who do not look or act or dress just like us.

I do not propose to know how to do this. To come to church some Sunday morning and find the spinsters sitting with the swingers; to discover the poor next to the platinum plated; to find CEOs sharing a pew with people nobody knows or cares about.

But I do believe that's the direction Jesus calls us to move in.

And according to the study I mentioned a minute ago if we aren't affecting our own and others' movement in some direction then we will be moving in the direction taken by someone else for better or worse.

Let me recap briefly what I am saying: first) our individual actions and attitudes affect not just the small circle of those we live with but ripple through many lives that multiply exponentially when you start tracking the web of relationships that connect people.

Second) Jesus was deeply aware of this social impact and its ability to be used for healing others he would never meet or come to know. Indeed, he had never laid eyes on the man using his name to cast out demons.

And third) the message for congregations like Westminster is that a group of people this large has enormous potential to bring about good in our world – starting with our own community – if we are clear about using our actions and attitudes for a higher cause.

I also said that we do a decent job partnering with others to change the world – just look at your bulletin cover; but that we are also typical of many mainline churches which seem to be living in hermetically sealed worlds if you start asking who's not in the pews.

And on that point the reading from James today opens perhaps a door to deeper, richer, more diverse congregational life. What James is conveying is our responsibility to one another, "If anyone wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering saves the sinner's soul from death and covers a multitude of sins."

Therefore, James says, "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers and yet much of the time we reflect the larger secular opinion and practice 'each to his own' 'don't get involved,' 'look out for yourself.'

If you read between the lines of what those researchers on social impact are saying and of what the bible is telling us this morning there are very real forces for good and forces of darkness in the world.

How else do you explain an entire nation like Germany falling lock/step behind an evil dictator; or an economically, racially-torn nation like South Africa doing away with its system of oppression and apartheid?

There is no question, after a week like last week with issues of nuclear proliferation at the UN and matters of economic justice at the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh that the world is at some crucial turning point.

There's little doubt that this city is racially, politically, and economically at some significant turning point.

Yet, I suspect that in our busy, stressed lives we come here sometimes not to change the world but to get away from the world. But what James suggests this morning is that the best way to find refuge from the forces of darkness and stress of life is to go deeper with one another; to share our struggles and pray together. Not because Jesus or the bible say so but because it is the path to healing.

When I say we have enormous potential to bring about a new day for our church and transform our community I mean that a group of people, like James describes, who understand what it means to be vulnerable to each other, to make amends with one another, and give each other permission to confront and call out the best in each other.

Living at that level of community would transform us into a spiritual reactor that could provide vast amounts of energy and good will to give even more warmth and light to lives that are now dark and cold.

I say I have no idea how this congregation can enter that next level of growth. But I suspect it begins not with a random but intentional act of caring or kindness passed from one person to another. Then somehow the Holy Spirit multiplies that small act in more and more lives.

My wonderful assistant, Margaret Craig, told last week about how when she was at home this summer recuperating from a stay in the hospital a friend came to visit. The friend has blanks of cards on which she places her own photographs and then sends them to people who need cheering up or are celebrating some occasion.

She thought Margaret might like the notion of using her photography and convalescence to reach out to others. So when a friend of Margaret's in New Hampshire had a death in the family, Margaret placed a beautiful picture she had taken of that woman's view from her home of the flower-strewn shoreline and the blue ocean beyond.

A week later the next door neighbor of that friend in New Hampshire died. So Margaret's friend took the picture that Margaret had taken and framed it and gave it to the husband of the woman who died. When the family members of the deceased woman saw the picture they said with tears in their eyes – this was the view mom delighted in every morning and gave her strength in her illness. So they, in turn, used the picture for the memory card distributed at the memorial service for their loved one.

What if Margaret's friend decided she was too busy or tired to stop by Margaret's home this summer? What if Margaret thought she was too burdened for whatever reason to send a card to her New Hampshire friend? What if that friend chose not to reach out to the family next door in grief?

I can tell you what: the world would be poorer right now; and the illusion that we aren't connected and our actions don't matter would have more credibility.

I don't have to tell you. These are perilous times. They're building a weapons grade nuclear reactor in Iran. Young men, born and raised in this nation, are plotting destruction. Unemployment in Buffalo and much of the country is literally off the charts and the unemployed off the grid.

We cannot afford to discount or devalue anything we do – no matter how small – that supports the cause of Jesus. We cannot afford to choose to be too busy or tired or unwilling to change old habits to reach out to one another. The stakes are too high.

It's time to raise the level of awareness and increasingly, intentionally focus our actions on healing the world...

starting with small acts of kindness and caring that build up and open up this congregation. Amen.