

Good Samaritan Mindset

by Andrew Franklin

Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends (SCYMF) has just given \$75,000 to Alaska Friends Conference, which will pass the gift along to the Kake Regional Cultural Healing Center in southeast Alaska. The process of taking this action has led many in SCYMF to reflect on American history in the light of the parable of the Good Samaritan and to reflect on ways we have turned away from the stranger in need.

Many Quakers are now well familiar with America's history of colonialism, slavery, oppression, and genocide, and we know something about the ways that these past sins have shaped our ongoing systems of inequity and injustice. But we quickly find ourselves at an impasse when we try assigning a proper proportion of financial responsibility today to sins in the past.

The funds that SCYMF is sending to Kake Indigenous Alaskans are a part of our inheritance from Northwest Yearly Meeting, previously named Oregon Yearly Meeting. During the early years of U.S. western expansionism, Oregon Yearly Meeting sent missionaries to establish and run a boarding school in Kake. This mission was a routine undertaking within the colonizing campaign of America, which laid claim to ownership of Indigenous homelands and sought to erase Indigenous cultures. We don't know the exact extent our Quaker predecessors' involvement in the attempt to eradicate tribal life among the people of Kake, but we know they were in the middle of it.

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The sin demonstrated in “The Good Samaritan” is indifference. In this parable, indifference is clearly portrayed as a selfish act of what we might call manslaughter today – the sinner coldly walks past the already half-dead stranger who is in desperate need. In our lives today, the sinfulness of indifference is less obvious.

After all, it is not only legal to avoid a suffering victim by crossing over to the other side of the road, indifference is also understood to be fundamentally necessary for many aspects of society to function. If you believe in evolution, you might see indifference as necessary for your DNA to continue replicating at the expense of the DNA of others. Indifference seems essential to human nature, to struggles among fearful cave dwellers, and to the survival of anyone who rises to the top.

In a system of disadvantage and inequity, even when we might truly want to change that system, we often find ourselves unwilling to risk our own place and status. Often, the only thing we need to do in order to rise in such a system – or to avoid greater loss – is to remain indifferent.

Turns out, our faith is asking us to do something much harder even than taking a victimized stranger to a hospital or hotel room for a couple of days and then paying the bills. We are asked to confront a society that capitalizes on indifference among strangers, and we are asked to transform that society into a new one built on loving all our neighbors, especially victimized strangers.

Furthermore, it is not enough merely to find and rectify our own faults, to take responsibility for our own sins. It is not enough to merely vow not to do those bad things again. Nor is it enough simply to do our best to mitigate the unjust outcomes of a system built on injustice. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows us how we are called to go further. The necessary step that we are called to take – the step that just might create within us a new and loving way of relating to strangers – is to actually just start doing it, to actually start treating all strangers as if they were neighbors worthy of our love and care. We may think complexity is the difference between a Good Samaritan solution for just one victimized stranger and a society-wide solution for systemic injustice. But maybe the necessary difference is only an increase in scale.

During the business meetings in which Sierra Cascades Friends deliberated whether to give a large amount of money to Indigenous Alaskans, different Friends repeatedly raised variations on the same question about wealth and complexity: How are this action and amount commensurate to our responsibility to Indigenous people for past injustices? How are this action and amount

commensurate to our responsibility to other previously victimized groups? How are this action and amount commensurate to the rest of what we have in our bank account? What would be commensurate to our expectation for future growth of our yearly meeting and future needs for capital? It took time, but slowly we saw the right thing to do was a Good Samaritan act for the victimized stranger, an act that would challenge our fears of spending wealth and of possibly lowering our socioeconomic status, an act that set many complexities aside, to be sorted out later.

Indifference is hard to overcome in a society built on indifference. Caring for others means giving, which means quantitatively having less, which might mean our own demotion in our social system, less status, and fewer resources for doing our caring in the future. But this is what we must do. We must care more about other people's today than we care about our own next year, next month, or even tomorrow.

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Martin Luther King once said, "Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." Our goal is not merely to care for others in order to fix damages caused by inadequate systems of care; our goal is to care in ways that can change the very systems that are intended to provide care in the first place.

A Good Samaritan mindset focuses on right relation with the entire world. An exploitive mindset focuses on maximizing personal profits as quickly as possible. Within a system powered by inequality, an exploitive mindset will externalize as many costs as possible. That is, the dominant group will force others to bear the necessary burdens of wealth creation, like back-breaking labor and toxic waste. Within the beloved community (our goal), each person would inhabit a mindset that thinks of every person on Earth as a member of their own extended family. And since Earth is our only home (there is no Planet B), this is the best mindset to allow human life to go forward.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Countless ecologists have produced countless estimates of the earth's carrying capacity for humans. One study concluded that, in order for everyone on Earth to enjoy the current average American lifestyle, we would need five Earths.

To put our lifestyles back to where they ought to be, we need to find ways to simplify, to give things away, to restore assets to people who have been cheated. If we want to change the system, we have to change our mindsets. A Good Samaritan mindset cares about the survival and benefit of all.

It's not good enough just to "be good" within a system that has killed so much of humanity and is poised to continue that killing. The American system is brutal – slavery, holocaust of Indigenous peoples, continued institutional oppression, and mind-boggling economic disparities. It is designed to encourage each and every one of us to take advantage of others' weaknesses.

We must accept the risk of leaving this system behind and stepping out into the light of loving generosity, with all its ambiguity. We can start by making basic changes in our lifestyles, like giving away everything we can to people in need. And we can learn how to turn off that compulsive worry about how we're going to get by in the future. In the beloved community, which we rightly aim toward, every person will be ready to help us when we are in need, and all of us will be ready to help the Earth together. ❖

Andrew Franklin recently moved to the Pacific Northwest from Kentucky, where he studied history at Berea College. He now lives with his partner, Janet Grove, in Camas, Washington. He attends Camas Friends, works for Goodwill Industries, and serves on the Equity and Inclusion Committee of Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends.

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