

RIPPLING

--With Thanksgiving in our rearview mirrors by a few days now, we may well find ourselves still basking a bit in the afterglow of our annual experience of heartfelt gratitude. (Or is that just the tryptophan still in our systems?)

Whatever the case, we can agree how very fortunate it is to be us--instead of being some weary victim caught in the unending wars in Syria or Afghanistan or Yemen, or being a member of the so-called "caravans" of those trying desperately to escape the corruption and violence of their native Guatemala or Honduras. Except for the apparent bad luck of these people for not living in America, they are, in most every other way, just like us--and so our hearts go out to them.

God, it seems, has purposefully created us with such heart, so that among those who "have," at least some will always be moved to want to share with those who are the "have-not's," near and far, whatever their description.

Oh, in our self-centered and self-indulgent world, we might wonder at times how deeply that seed of heart is buried, that seed which--per part of this morning's trio of readings concerning God's kingdom--is said to be growing unmistakably, secretly, in every human being (4.27b). Whatever the answer is to this question of depth, the fact remains that, while the focus on only selfish needs and ends is the province of every low human being, the reaching out with compassion and generosity is always the hallmark of higher ones.

--All this leads to the primary point to this morning's reflections: As human beings, for all of our notable short-comings, we are created with a built-in impulse to do good.

Sometimes, in the case of persons of considerable means, that is accomplished in great and sweeping ways. A Warren Buffet. A Bill Gates. More often, that is accomplished by persons of whatever means in those little "mustard-seed" ways and times, to draw on a second image from our readings (4.31-32). No matter whether the deeds are grand or humble, we have the active Spirit of God to thank for all of them--which afford us hints of the outlines and the substance of an equitable and just world that can one day come with greater fullness, if only we are inclined strongly enough to bring it about.

To that end, we have Jesus' assurance that "there is nothing hidden . . . except to come to light" (4.22). Here, then, is that light that must not be hidden away from the world, but that must be concretely expressed. In our good deeds is something of the largely-buried light which is intended to shine in a world otherwise riddled with human darkness.

--If the inherent propensity to do good is the primary point here, then there is a valuable secondary point to be added immediately to it: If we are created with the desire to do good, then we must also understand that we will probably never know the full impact of the good that we do. Again, there is that image of the mustard seed--to start, the tiniest of seeds and yet which, when grown to maturity, reportedly produces the largest of all shrubs.

“Small” good deeds can sometimes produce the most surprising and extraordinary of results. Let us therefore never underestimate the power of a smile, a pat on the arm, a sincere kind word, or some subtle act of encouragement. At just the right moment, such little things can have a huge impact on someone else’s world, and therefore upon the world.

The good that we muster and release, no matter how insignificant it may seem to us, does not just quickly come and go in a single instant in time, either. It continues to touch and affect the human order, just as surely as the rings continue moving outward from the pebble dropped into the pond, and just as surely as the wave goes on undulating long after we are able to see it.

--Consistent with that image, modern psychology speaks of a fascinating phenomenon that it calls “rippling.” Let me share something of the notion with you.

A psychologist that I know tells the story of a personal experience that he has following a training or teaching presentation he has made. After the conclusion of his formal remarks, a small group gathers around him, desiring to make some comment or ask some question.

One of these people is a young woman who identifies herself as the daughter of a particular man who was, she says, in therapy with this psychologist some thirty years earlier. While the psychologist stands there trying to recall exactly who, among all of his other patients from three decades before, the fellow might have been, the woman proceeds to say, “Thank you. You actually saved his life.”

To be sure, that is a rather stunning and humbling thing for her to state, but it is nothing compared to what she says next. She adds, “And you saved my life, too.”

Understand: The psychologist does effective therapy and helps the man, whom he has been seeing, and, totally unknown to him, in helping the man helps the man’s daughter, whom he has never seen before. That is a true story, and it proves the whole point that we just never know the full magnitude of the good that we do.

Rippling--an instance of the good that is done continuing its wave of positive influence far after the initiating event. We can never know the full range or the extent of the good in the good that we do.

It’s that important, then, that we do it. Truly thankful people always will.

--Pulling all of this together, as we prepare to move into December and into a new year: If Thanksgiving, as it were, “took” this year, if there has been any movement of heart for you, there will inevitably be “ripples.”

So . . . seeing anything?