

Loving Our Diversity

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Alison Warner-Smith

As you may have noticed in the PowerPoint at the beginning of the service, today's focus is "Love Your Neighbour Who Doesn't **Look** Like You." When was the last time you thought about the fact that you are a member of the entire human species? *Homo sapiens*. No other identifying features. "Hi, I'm Alison, a member of *Homo sapiens*." I think if other civilizations are really "out there," they would see us as one big collection of people – the human race. That's how God sees us.

But I think for most of us, this singularity of our identity is not front and centre. We tend to identify by things that we **think** are more relevant, like gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, political party, sports team affiliations, and all of our other group memberships, large and small. Not only do we stake our identity and often also our sense of self-worth in these groups, but we tend to be more helpful towards those who belong to them, often at the expense of those who do not.

A significant minority of people, however, which certainly includes our congregation, seem less concerned with group distinctions. Rather, the sense of limitless kinship is particularly strong. For example, after the Japanese earthquake and resultant tsunami of 2011, people from all over the world, of all different stripes, risked their lives to provide emergency assistance and remained to help rebuild the parts of Japan that were affected. In interviews conducted by Kristen Renwick Monroe for her book, "The Heart of Altruism"¹, many of the people who helped save Jewish people from the Holocaust, despite risking their own lives to do so, described a sense of common humanity, or "belonging to one human family." And, as you might guess, those who did not offer help were less likely to possess this feeling of expanded kinship. The people who helped others had a common humanitarian goal and worked together.

In a 2012 research study² published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, psychologists Sam McFarland, Matthew Webb, and Derek Brown developed a new scale for measuring individual differences in this attribute of "expanded kinship," called the Identification with All Humanity scale (IWAH). Yes, it is a real, standardized scale. The IWAH is unique in that it identifies where people draw the line, and therefore it can make meaningful predictions about their behavior in a wider range of situations. For example, people who score high in IWAH are also more concerned about global issues such as combating world hunger and addressing human rights violations.

Some highlights from their research include the finding, "It's more than just being a good person." Plenty of scales exist to measure traits like altruism and compassion, but these

¹ "The Heart of Altruism" by Kristen Renwick Monroe, ©1996 Princeton University Press.

² <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-16073-001>

kinds of scales do not differentiate between people who feel connected only to a specific group of people and those who feel connected to all people. In other words, you might feel nothing but good will towards people who are similar to you, but how do you *really* feel about people whose ethnicities, values, and lifestyles are different from your own?

Another finding is, “Caring about humanity might make you a nervous wreck.” Not surprisingly, people high in Identifying with All Humanity tend to be higher in the personality traits of openness to experience and agreeableness. But it turns out that they are also higher on the scale for anxiety. In my anxiety-ridden mind, it’s not surprising that those who worry about little things also worry about big things, like the state of humanity all over the world. So, if you’re a generally anxious person, it’s maybe not so surprising that human suffering and injustice anywhere in the world would be something you worry about.

Another finding for people high on the scale is, “Every person is basically you.” If you think this, then you must think that every life is worth just as much as your own. It’s hard to imagine a world without any distinctions at all. But it seems that identification with all humanity is possible even in the most dire of circumstances, such as for victims of natural disasters who have lost everything themselves and yet still help strangers, who may not look like them at all, get back on their feet. Just think about all the humanitarian aid workers who stopped everything in their own lives to help the Haitian people following devastating earthquakes. They had a common goal.

So, why are so many people biased towards others because of any difference from themselves, the most obvious difference being colour? Why do we not see humanity as a big, wonderful whole rather than many different subsets? Why do so many people think another person is of less value if they’re “not like me?” Rev. Dave sent me a link to an article from CBC news³ about a recent medical illustration of a baby still inside its mother’s womb. Syrus Marcus Ware, an assistant professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, was “immediately struck” by this image.

Just what was so striking about it? Well, it was an illustration of a pregnant *Black* woman, showing a *Black* fetus inside her belly. The illustration was created by Nigerian medical student and Illustrator (pardon my pronunciation) Chidiebere Ibe. “I realized that I had never seen anything like it,” Professor Ware told CBC Hamilton. “I had literally never seen a Black baby drawn in a uterus... I realized that I hadn't even noticed that was the case until the evidence was right in front of me. It's so interesting how normalized it is that we are so used to only ever seeing white babies that we don't even notice, and so it's so striking to see this Black baby drawing this way.”

Ware went on to say, “This young medical illustrator is... interrupting the process of white supremacy and instead saying, in fact, I want to imagine Black babies being born in this world, so I'm going to draw them ...It really shows the importance of

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/black-fetus-illustration-1.6277131>

representation." I have to agree. When I was studying to become an occupational therapist, in all the huge anatomy texts with thousands of pictures, all of them were of white people. I'm ashamed to say that I never noticed, likely because I'm white.

Now you're probably asking what this all has to do with the Magi. I did a lot of research on the Magi for this message and here is some of what I found out from a number of different scholarly sources.⁴ Apart from their names, the three Magi have distinct characteristics in Christian tradition, so that between them they represented the three ages of adults, and three geographical and cultural areas, among other things. It seems that Caspar is the oldest, around 60 years of age, and gives the gift of precious gold. He is likely the King of Tarsus, on the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey, not all that far from Bethlehem. He and Jesus probably looked a lot like each other with respect to ethnicity. Remember, Jesus was from the Middle East and so was not "white," like all the depictions I saw of him when I was a child, and still see today. Melchior is likely middle-aged, around 40 years old, giving frankincense from Arabia, much farther south of Bethlehem where people are darker skinned. And Balthazar is likely a young man, around 20, and gives myrrh from modern south Yemen. Balthazar is probably from Ethiopia and is likely a Black man. They probably all had different faith traditions, as well, coming from such varied places.

So, here they were, three different men, different in age, different in wealth based on their gifts, different in colour, and different in faith, all traveling long but differing distances from different countries to one place. Their differences didn't matter to them. They had a singular purpose, a common goal – to follow the star in the East to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the King of Kings, to honour the child who would become our Messiah. It was their commonality that was important, not their differences. And wouldn't it be a better world if we all remembered our commonalities first? Yes, there are many differences in people the world over, but in the end, we are only human, after all. Amen.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi#cite_note-48