

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15; 2 Tim. 2:8-15; Kyje 17:11-19

Sam Harris, one of the so-called “new atheists,” has a new book out. Its title is *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Harris believes that you and I are irrational for being religious and wants to show that the traditional arguments for religion, are wrong. His first book, titled *The End of faith*, was written “to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms.” His new book proposes to say how science can answer questions of meaning, morality and life’s purpose, questions which have traditionally been the province of religion.

According to Harris, science is the means not just for establishing facts but for establishing values as well. By values he means whatever enhances human well-being for us individually and socially. The means for doing this is a philosophy that is more than 200 years old called utilitarianism, which has endless philosophical problems which have never been resolved and which we need not go into here, except to say that Harris can’t answer the basic question that bedevils all utilitarians: viz., what is meant by well-being and further, how is it that science reveals this to us? Harris contends that there are correct answers to all questions of right and wrong, regardless of anyone’s culture or religion, and that it is science that will give us these correct answers. Religions, of course, also believe there are correct answers to questions of right and wrong, as do the

majority of philosophers, but according to Harris, it is only the sciences that give us the right methods for finding these answers.

Sam Harris is a smart guy. He has a doctorate in neuroscience—how the brain works—and that is a most interesting field of inquiry and one which has much to teach us. But Harris, smart as he is, is also obsessed with a view of science that thinks of the world as a vast and complex machine such that everything that happens, including you and all the things around you and that are important to you, are the products of forces of cause and effect which science is able to explain. This is not, however, what the best scientists believe. They admit that there are patterns of action and behavior from which we can understand and predict the probabilities of things happening—probability not certainty—but beyond this they also admit that we cannot explain how causality works, let alone why.

Alright, but here I am, doing exactly what I have been told not to do in the Second Letter to Timothy, “wrangling about words.” I apologize. It’s just that Harris is something of an intellectual bully, and we should not allow ourselves to be intimidated by such bullying. And yet, even as I say this, it must be admitted that Harris is himself reacting to the bullying of the religious, who have for too long acted as if they had the inside track on the truth that could not be known unless you were one with them, subscribing to everything they were saying, often without evidence, just dogmatically brow-beating others to believe as they do.

I have read to you the story of Jesus, traveling between the regions of Samaria and Galilee and approached by ten lepers. It seems they know Jesus and expect him to be able to do something about their leprosy, and, lo and behold, he does. He heals them!

Imagine yourself a leper, suffering this terrible disease, this sickness that was in the ancient world a hopeless condition, and then suddenly you are healed. Boom! Presto, change-o! Would you not be grateful? Would you not want to rush back to the one who had spoken the words which healed, who had the healing magic as it were, and thank him? It's inconceivable, is it not, that one would not feel compelled to offer some expression of thanks. But be that as it may, nine of the ten former lepers go their way and can't be bothered to come back and give thanks for their new-found health. Only one of the ten returns, a Samaritan.

I've asked you to imagine yourself into this story, but as we do so, let us be aware that miracle stories in the Bible are not about actual healings so much as they are tales to increase our spiritual understanding. Leprosy stories are about spiritual purity and impurity and about who is acceptable and who is not, who is deserving and who is unworthy. Religion is too often about making these kinds of distinctions that privilege some and exclude others, and to the extent that this is the case we can appreciate Sam Harris' hostility to religion. In the story in question, though, Jesus eliminates the distinction between clean and unclean by healing lepers. That is to say, his faith is not about privilege. All are healed, welcomed, loved, including even outcasts, as represented in the story by the Samaritan leper, the only one who returns to show his gratitude. This detail drives home the story's meaning inasmuch as Samaritans were viewed by pious Jews as unworthy untouchables. The story teaches that no one but no one is beyond the love of God, and that the distinctions religions make between the blessed and the damned are themselves damnable and to be rejected as ungodly. If Sam Harris could see this, he

might have a more tolerant view of religiosity, or at least of the sort of religiosity that Jesus teaches.

We might add here that the story of Jesus' healing of the ten lepers can be read as a kind of commentary on the story of Naaman the leper who is prevailed upon by Elisha to take a dip in the Jordan, Israel's river, to be made clean. The point of this story is that the God of Israel is the supreme God above all others. It is also possible to read this story as teaching that God will only be gracious to those who believe as the Israelites do. It is also possible, though, to read the story as teaching that we must get beyond all the limiting understandings of who God is, as represented in Naaman's preference for the rivers of Damascus, so that we can see the God who is beyond the confines of one's own people and traditions. Is this not what is at issue in the conflict between modern Israel and the Palestinians that continues to corrupt the so-called holy land to this very day?

A persistent feature of our worship is the celebration of the Eucharist, the word for Holy Communion that means "gratitude." At the heart of our faith, truly understood, is the action and attitude of gratitude, gratitude to God in whom we live and move and have our being, and gratitude for the good our community with one another does for us. It is, however, no easy thing to maintain the spirit of gratitude in a world where there is so much ingratitude in the form of greed and violence and all manner of selfishness and cruelty. As a case in point, what does it mean to live in the spirit of gratitude in the instance of the recent cyber-bullying of a gay student at Rutgers? Perhaps if the bullies had approached the world with gratitude for life, their own and others, they would have recognized the evil of bullying. People who are now grateful for the life of the young man who was tormented may now be more grateful for others whose lives are vulnerable

and who are on the margins, and as a consequence there will be fewer instances of bullying in the future. And if there is gratitude for the lives of the bullies, they will perhaps be seen as themselves victims of the spirit of ingratitude that causes some people to prey upon others. In any case, our faith teaches us that life is to be lived in the spirit of gratitude. What objection could there be to such a faith? Might not even Sam Harris be grateful for a faith that enshrines and expresses such teachings? Amen.

20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 10, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church