

**“One is Better Than Zero”**  
**Exodus 2:23-25 and *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Christ the King Sunday**  
**November 20, 2016**

I used to think God’s noticing is what sets God apart. That God notices our suffering or others’ even when we don’t. That God has an almost infrared ability to pick up on the silent suffering of others, to notice it with few clues or evidence. I think that may be true about God - God you search me and know me, when I sit down and when I rise.

But the Israelites groaned. They cried out. They voiced their suffering. And their cry rose up to God. And then – after they had voiced their suffering - then God heard, and God remembered God’s promises and God saw and God noticed.

I don’t think what sets God apart is noticing everything – at least not in today’s text. It’s what God does *after* God learns of human suffering. The way God refuses to let injustice and suffering continue.

Peter Singer, the ethicist and philosopher, says that most human beings are like this, to a point. He asks his students to imagine they are walking to class and pass by a shallow pond where they see a child who appears to be drowning. To save the child would be easy, he tells his students, but it would mean that you would get muddy and wet, perhaps your clothes would be ruined and you would definitely miss your first class. Then he asks his students: do you have any obligation to rescue the child? Unanimously, he reports, the students all say yes. There is a moral responsibility to rescue the child. Rescuing the child far outweighs the cost of time or money involved. Does it make a difference he asks, that other people walking near the pond are not rescuing the child even though they could? No, the students argue, the fact that others are not doing what they ought to do is no reason why I should not do what I ought to do.<sup>1</sup>

Singer then asks his students another question – “would it make any difference if the child were far away, in another country perhaps, but similarly in danger of death, and equally within your means to save, at no great cost – and absolutely no danger – to yourself?” Almost everyone agrees, he says, that distance and nationality make no moral difference in this situation. If there is a possibility of saving the child, we have an obligation to do so.

Singer then points out to his students that we are all in that situation of the person passing the shallow pond: we can all save lives of people, both children and adults, who would otherwise die, and we can do so at a very small cost to us. The cost of Netflix subscription, a shirt or a night out at a restaurant or concert, can mean the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Singer, “The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle,” *The New Internationalist*, April 1997, <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/199704--.htm>. I was surprised to see such a compassionate reading coming from Peter Singer, whose callous writings on the value of people of disabilities I reject.

difference between life and death to more than one person somewhere in the world and overseas aid agencies overcome the problem of acting at a distance.

It's at this point, Singer reports, that his students start raising all kinds of practical questions. How can they be sure that their money is really going for the purpose stated? What about more systemic problems that need to be addressed to prevent their money from being wasted?

It's these questions, these excuses that differentiate us from God. We notice suffering just as God notices. We hear the cries that God hears. The pain of others is there for us to see. We just exercise ways of convincing ourselves why others' suffering isn't ours to acknowledge, or share, or notice.

These excuses, argues psychologist Scott Plous, shut down our compassion. "We tell ourselves stories about why it's OK not to help," he says, "why it's OK not to help once. And we say, well, because if I then did one, I would have to do a hundred, and I couldn't possibly do that. But in fact, sometimes you can do one. And one is better than zero."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Falker could have come up with a story about why it was okay not to help Trisha. He could have told himself that he was a young teacher and needed to focus on the whole class, not one student. That he wasn't equipped to handle a special needs child. That he didn't have the time, or the expertise to address her needs. After all it wasn't really his fault that she couldn't read, it was the teachers before him who had failed to notice. It's not hard to find legitimate excuses for why he shouldn't get involved, which makes me wonder - who shaped Mr. Falker this way?

Who shaped him to absorb the idea that living your life around others is what living your life is all about? Who shaped him to think about human need as an opportunity for connection rather than a problem to avoid? Who taught him that ancient wisdom that pleasure is not usually found by pursuing pleasure, but in serving with and for others?<sup>3</sup>

I don't know who shaped Mr. Falker but I know that's the shaping that we are after in this church. The place that shapes people to experience the world as God experiences it - attuned to others' suffering, awakened to our own compassion, thankful that while we can't do everything, while we can't serve everyone, while we can't heal everyone, we can do and serve and heal some. One is better than zero.

The church exists to shape us into followers of a God whose purpose, whose mission, whose life is tied to the wellbeing of others. People who attune their lives to God's compassionate instincts and impulses.

It's that mission that drives our life. It's the mission that demands the best from us - our time, our prayers, our money. Shaping a people whose love for God and

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<sup>2</sup> Plous interviewed by Shankar Vedantam on "The Hidden Brain," *National Public Radio*, October 20, 2016. Plous, a professor at Wesleyan University teaches a psychology course on the nature of compassion, the norm of reciprocity, and the power of empathy, <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=448075446>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Sidwick, whose *Methods of Ethics* is one of many attempts to find a foundation for morality without the need for religion, named this "paradox of hedonism" - "The impulse towards pleasure can be self-defeating. We fail to attain pleasures if we deliberately seek them." Sidwick noted that moral universalism requires its adherents to accept conflicting basic principles, for example, self-sacrifice which goes against the ego.

love for justice in the world are inseparable. Sometimes I think that shaping makes us into an odd people. People who are talking about how to be more compassionate in a country that wants to send refugees home. People who are wanting to learn how to be more generous at precisely the time when most people seem to want to pull back from helping others around the world. People who are striving to be open at a time when many people in our country think it would be better to shut everything down. Sometimes I feel that disconnect between the shaping that happens here and the way the world seems to operate.

I was at the cell phone store a couple of weeks ago. We finally got our 10<sup>th</sup> grader a smart phone. And the salesperson worked very hard to upsell us to other things. "The store is laid out like a home," he told us without apology, "so you can see all the stuff that can make your life better." Perhaps we wanted a smart watch, or a smart technology for our home. No thank you. No thank you. Our salesman started to show his frustration - clearly we were a miserable people who didn't want our lives to be better. And we got to the TV section and he said, "for example, how many TVs do you have in your home currently." And I said, "We have one." One? he asked? Yes. You have *one* TV? Yes. *Just one*? Just one. Like, one flat screen or just one. Just one. I leaned in to protect my children from this obvious shame. We keep it in the basement. "Well, what do you do if two of you want to watch something at the same time?" he demanded. "You're not going to believe this," I told him, "but we talk to each other and work something out." Or, I said, we read books. Some nights, I told him, we don't even watch TV. We play something called "board games." Sometimes we just sit and talk.

It occurred to me later that what happens in our congregation - the shaping of a people to be attentive to each other and to God's grace in the world, a people who practice generosity in a time where scarcity and fear is in vogue, a people who look for God amidst the might just be more and more odd, more and more marginal to the mainstream.

But it's like the psychologist said - One is better than zero. One human being, whose life and call is shaped by God's compassion, God's attention to others' suffering, by the truth that our deepest meaning is found in relationship with others; one human being shaped like that - to know the depth of God's love and the vocation that love issues. That's a gift to us and to the world.

Just asked Patricia Polacco. She writes some of the most moving, compassionate children's book of any contemporary author. Stories of Christians and Jews sharing with each other from the best of our traditions; stories of immigrants honoring each others' traditions; stories of bullies healed of their racism and their emptiness. Stories of teachers and parents, and storekeepers, and good citizens, shaped to be attentive to each others' suffering. Those stories didn't come out of her by accident. She was shaped by someone.

I know this because she tells us at the end of this book. The Trisha of the book, we learn, is Patricia Polacco, the author.

"I saw Mr. Falker again some thirty years later at a wedding" she recalls. "I walked up to him and introduced myself. At first he had difficulty placing me. Then I told him who I was, and how he had changed my life so many years ago.

He hugged me and asked me what I did for a living. "Why, Mr. Falker," answered the student who could have gone through life never learning to read. "I make books for children. . . . Thank you, Mr. Falker. Thank you."