Elbows on the table

What I learned about small harms and salvation at summer camp

Malinda E. Berry

Introduction

The big idea at the heart of this issue of *Vision* is that small things matter because, among other things, they are the foundation for doing more complex things. This makes both intuitive and logical sense. I am able to write this journal article because I learned how to read, write, and understand small words when I was a child.

But we are applying this basic principle not to learning how to cook or mow the lawn; we are applying it to the morality, values, and beliefs central to Christian faith and religious practice—namely, the forgiveness of harm (trespasses against us). Barbara Nascimbeni writes, "God is smallness. We know God is huge. And yet God also became small, deciding to live in our world, to be a baby . . . who has to learn to walk and talk."[1] How did we forget that God's forgiveness isn't always huge?

Lesson 1: Green means I am kind and caring

This past summer, I served as pastor for a group of rising fifth- and sixth-graders attending a week at a Mennonite camp. If you have spent any time at a church camp, you know that the experience is often laden with traditions, from singing to pranking. Some of these traditions are beautiful, and some are simply habits we have stopped questioning. One tradition I encountered happened at mealtimes. It involved chants to get staff and campers to do various things. I don't remember this kind of thing from my days as a camper, but after doing a little research, I can appreciate how this tradition is an example of prosocial teasing. It's a lighthearted way to build camp camaraderie through "collective effervescence," though I found some of these rituals obnoxious and wished for subtler, kinder group bonding rituals. For example, if someone is caught with their elbows on the table, the rest of the dining hall points out this error in etiquette in a chant that includes this line: "Round the table you must go, you are lazy!"

1 Marie-Hélène Delval, *Images of God for Young Children*, illus. Barbara Nascimbeni (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 78.

On Tuesday, the campers tried to get me to join in. Since I was clearly older than their cool young-adult counselors, I was not expecting to be drawn into their game. But I was, and as they chanted, something deep inside me welled up to say, "No!" and I stayed seated. Wednesday morning, I decided to use our worship and teaching time to revisit what had happened at Tuesday lunch.

But before I continue, my story needs a bit more context. For reasons both geographical and racial, I have mixed thoughts and feelings about the theological symbolism of light and darkness, and one of the ways I work with my discomfort is to refract light, turning it into a spectrum of colors.[2] To this end, at camp we began each morning with a simple meditation and prayer practice, with each color of the rainbow giving us a message about how God's light shines in and through us. Using three sturdy twigs and strands of yarn in all the colors of the rainbow, campers also created a craft called a Wonder Eye to help them look at God's beloved world with wonder and awe as they trained to be "Detectives of Divinity."[3] I even wore a different color each day to help us focus on a particular message.

Wednesday was the day I wore green, and the campers actually remembered that green means "I am kind and caring."

The day's Bible story was Matt 14:22–33, which describes Jesus walking on stormy waters and Simon Peter sinking after his first step as fear overtook him. I decided to step out of our metaphorical boat and trust their capacity for care. I pulled out a childhood family photograph that I happened to have with me and showed it to them, asking them questions about what they saw. In the photo, I am a two-year-old sitting on my mother's lap, looking very uncertain about having my picture taken. The photo also gives them clues about where my ancestors come from: both Europe and Africa.

With my heart beating fast and about 140 people looking back at me, I explained why their chant left me sitting in my chair. I asked questions as campers called out the answers, and together we painted a picture of pain, sadness, and fear. I explained that my people had lived in bondage with masters who would beat them if they deemed them to be "lazy." Across

2 While light/dark imagery becomes complex in relation to racial categories, it is also bound to Northern Hemisphere geography. In temperate northern zones, daylight and warmth ebb and flow dramatically across the seasons, giving winter and spring immense liturgical weight (Christ is born in a season of darkness, and resurrected in a season of new life). This dynamic does not reflect the environmental rhythms of the Southern Hemisphere or life near the Equator.

3 Bryan Moyer Suderman, "Detectives of Divinity," track 2 on *Detectives of Divinity*, SmallTall Music, 2011, MP3 audio. Here is the refrain: "We are detectives of divinity, we're looking all around / for signs of God's activity, wherever they are found / God is up to something, of that you can be sure / so start the investigation! The clues are everywhere."

generations in my family, the word "lazy" is not a lighthearted joke; it is a word with weight.

When that word was chanted in the dining hall, even in jest, my body filled up with big feelings from the distant past and the past of my own lifetime. About seven or eight years ago, my father asked me a question borne of a Black man's anxiety and fear that his Black daughter would be denied promotion or further employment: "Are you pulling your weight over there at the seminary?"

I was taking a risk sharing my feelings with a clearing full of energetic tweens. I asked them honestly: "Are my big feelings a problem to solve or fix?" They looked at me, and with the beautiful, disarming clarity that children possess, a small chorus of voices clearly answered, "No."

I wanted to impress upon them the importance of listening to others with compassion and kindness during stormy times without needing to act, so I asked another question: "Does anything need to change?" expecting to hear another "No." To my surprise, there was a voice that said, "Maybe," along with a blend of yeses and nos. So I directed them to their cabin groups to talk about that question or to just share their own experiences of stormy times and big feelings.

Some of them decided to make a change, and "you are lazy" became "be more proper." They wanted to reshape the camp culture so that the dining hall could be more spacious and the tradition could truly serve its purpose. It was a deeply moving moment of community, and it happened on the very day they were tying green yarn onto their Wonder Eyes.

What happened that day was not a massive, cosmic shift in the universe. It was a small, beautiful burst of *ubuntu* and *shalom*. It was an ordinary moment of salvation.

Lesson 2: What to do when a small harm feels like a cosmic crime

Reclaiming Anselm's eleventh-century theory of atonement, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, coupled with the Cartesian rationalism of the seventeenth century, put Western Christianity on a trajectory that led to a deeply individualistic place. "I think, therefore I am" is part and parcel of how salvation went from a spectrum of grace to a chargesheet of crimes as believers sought to avoid everlasting torment.

This has meant that for many Christians, everyday faith has become a highly personal quest to make it into heaven rather than a shared daily practice of *ubuntu* and *shalom/eirene*.[4] We see it all around us: "Faith" is expressed

4 Michael Battle, "How Should We Live? The Christian Life," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 291. An important part of the worldview of Christians in Southern Africa, *ubuntu* names the interdependent nature of identity formation. Battle explains, "In contrast to the philosopher Descartes's characteristically Western assertion, 'I think, therefore I am,' Africans would say, 'I am,

through consumer culture, familiar slogans, and popular sacred music that describe how Jesus changes everything because *he* died for *our* sins, saving us from ourselves and leading to heavenly rewards in the life to come. This makes not just Jesus's power to forgive, but sin itself, a very BIG deal.

One result is that Westernized people tend to lump our experiences of harm and suffering into one big pile of pain, and it must be someone's fault. When we do that, every problem, no matter how (in)consequential, is given equal moral weight. After all, doesn't the Bible say something about "sin is sin is sin"? Even if we reject this interpretation of James 2:10, we can still get caught up in comparing the size of sins and transgressions because we can perceive both God and the devil in the details. If every choice I make can be scrutinized so that it either becomes evidence of my superb moral character or of my significant moral shortcomings, then where is the joy of Christian living? Questions like this keep us on a perpetual roller coaster of emotional pain as we carry a heavy, unarticulated burden of daily condemnation, unable to separate the genuine pain of a broken relationship from the background noise of systemic anxiety caused by the Domination System.[5]

When that sensitivity goes unnamed, our nervous systems start to register the smallest, messiest human moments as ruptures in our moral universe. But as those tweens showed us, big emotions aren't a cosmic crime—they're an invitation to reorient and reconnect.

The legacy of biblical nonresistance among Mennonite groups in the Americas has developed into different forms of active peacemaking and political advocacy. This has led to patterns of faith formation that have given many of us a deeply felt, highly acute sensitivity to inconsistencies, unfairness, and injustice.[6] When that sensitivity goes unnamed, our nervous

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because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' The person is part of the whole, and one's identity flows from the corporate experience and never in isolation from it." My reference to *shalom/eirene* is based on Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

5 Walter Wink writes, "I use the expression 'the Domination System' to indicate what happens when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values." Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Powers Trilogy, vol. 3 (Fortress Press, 1992), 9.

6 Anna Baumert, Aya Adra, and Mengyao Li, "Justice Sensitivity in Intergroup Contexts: A Theoretical Framework," *Social Justice Research* 35 (2022): 7–32.

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Lesson 3: All the colors of salvation

In her writings, Julian of Norwich (fourteenth century) describes how God's saving work creates a social fabric and a new way of seeing. "The reward of salvation is to grow into the fullness of our humanity. Julian calls this 'oneing,' and it is the process of growing into one-ness with God."[7] This is good news: We have an alternative to the dominant individualistic storyline of Western Christianity.

When we start telling this other story, the first one starts to unravel, and we see naturally occurring differences we can call "polarities." These are the opposites, to use an analogy from knitting, that give us working tension. When these *polarities* become *polarized*, the tension is so strong that we can't knit. Here is an example that may feel like a caricature.

Reconciliation. Repentance. Repair. For socially conscious Christians, these theological terms are connected to our search for ways to make wrongs right. Reconciliation is favored by those who lean to the right end of the spectrum, repair by those who lean to the left, and repentance claimed by both with different notions about the nature of the wrongs under consideration. Those focused on repair tend to conceive of the seven social sins as what people need to repent of. Those focused on reconciliation tend to believe that personal moral failings defined by the seven deadly sins are what call for repentance.[8]

What I love about Julian's description of "oneing" is that God is not absorbing us into their being but "knitting" us into a cosmic *ubuntu* of *shalom*. The reality of biblical faith is that God is interested in the whole spectrum. God is interested in us as the individual quirky people we are, and God makes agreements and promises with whole communities. God cares about what I do, God cares about what we do, and God cares about how our choices shape our attitudes, beliefs, and actions. But here's the thing: *God cares about all these choices because God wants Creation to flourish and thrive, not*

7 Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Pilgrim Press, 2000), 20.

8 The "Seven Social Sins" named by Frederic Donaldson and popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce and industry without morality, science without humanity, worship and religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle. Early Christians developed a list of "deadly sins," and the list varies based on translation. Around 590, Pope Gregory I consolidated the list into what we know today as the "seven deadly sins" of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

God cares about all these choices because God wants Creation to flourish and thrive, not because God is waiting to punish us or collect a fine for each misstep we make.

because God is waiting to punish us or collect a fine for each misstep we make.[9] From a theological perspective, this means that God's justice, love, and healing (all theological synonyms for "salvation") are enough for all the ways we miss the mark (sin), individually or collectively, from the extraordinary (committing crimes against humanity) to the ordinary (using plastic shopping bags).

If we can let the bigness of God's "both/and" ease our tension in the form of theological polarization, I believe we can also see the interplay between the individual, the collective, the trespasses we commit, and the trespasses committed against us, which reveals something about the full spectrum of salvation. As Brethren biblical scholar Brenda Colijn explains in her book *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*, the Bible's wide range of soteriological images challenges the idea that God's plan of salvation is either strictly personal, spiritual, and heavenly *or* is only collective, social, and earthly. She writes, "God's purpose in salvation is to enable a broken creation to become a true reflection of its creator," adding, "We must focus more attention on the growth and completion of salvation" as *we live into Christ*, not Christ living in us.[10]

Daily life provides us with abundant opportunities to see how this understanding of salvation reveals itself in a rich, colorful spectrum of grace, as I discovered when I went to summer camp with a big bag of yarn.

Conclusion

As church leaders, in our faith-forming and peace-seeking work, we are often tempted to believe that our primary task is to manage the large-scale mechanics of faith—nurturing right relationships, preaching life-giving beliefs, tackling massive systemic evils, and carrying the weight of a broken universe on our fragile shoulders.

But the real work of the gospel, the work of God's *shalom-justice*, almost always happens on the scale of green yarn. For those of us who carry the beautiful, exhausting gift of a deep sensitivity to the wrongs we encounter

9 That there can be negative, undesirable consequences that result from our choices is a given; my point is that God doesn't exist to punish us.

10 Brenda B. Colijn, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2010), 314–316. She writes, "It is only because of what God has done for us in Christ that we can clearly see the hopeless situation we are in because of sin. A fully biblical understanding of salvation is therefore Christocentric rather than anthropocentric. In the New Testament perspective, we do not invite Jesus in our lives; he invites us into his" (314).

across the street and around the world, this ordinary salvation is our lifeline. We do not have to resolve every systemic injustice before we can experience the vibrance of God's power.

Let us sit together at the ordinary tables of our daily lives, putting our elbows on the table as we lean into the messy, vulnerable, and joyful work of living. We may even spot some rainbows dancing around us, glancing off windowpanes and water glasses.

About the author

Malinda Elizabeth Berry is a member of the teaching faculty at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where she serves as Professor of Peace Theology and Director of the Faith Formation Collaborative. In addition to teaching and writing, she is trying to become adept at "Kellia," a cooperative board game created by the Brothers of Taizé; it is taking considerable patience and practice.