

# HOW MUCH OF THE WORLD DOES JESUS ASK US TO INCLUDE?

Wayne Jack Plumstead

*Whenever Christians gather to worship publicly, at some point or other it is very likely that the Lord's Prayer will be said. And yet, how seldom we realize one of the most outstanding characteristics of that prayer:<sup>1</sup>*

“When you pray,” said Jesus, “say Our.” “Our Father...Our daily bread...Our debts...Our debtors.” Isn't that how Jesus thought and acted all the time? He heals the daughter of a Roman soldier whose work it is to ruthlessly oppress Jesus' very own people. He sits down at a well with a Samaritan woman—considered his social and moral inferior—and gratefully receives water from her hands. He travels to the other side of the sea of Galilee—the wrong side—to that evil country of Gadara, filled with unbelievers, and what he sees are brothers and sisters in the same human family.

Jesus crosses every boundary; reaches beneath every division—and in this fractious world he draws together disparate elements in the unbreakable bonds of his great, grand Our. Yet, the full idea of “Our” has never been easy for humanity—never—and being able to honestly mean it constitutes one of the greatest spiritual triumphs.

Imagine yourself doing this exercise. Begin with a big, blank sheet of paper. In the center put a small dot. That dot is you. Then draw a circle completely around the dot, and in that circle write the names of the people closest to you: your spouse, your children or parents. Now draw a circle around that circle. In it write the names of the next closest people—extended family, friends. Now draw

“Pray then like this: Our Father . . . .”

Matthew 6:9

another circle and include the next closest people—colleagues perhaps, or members of an organization to which you belong.

Make as many circles as you can think of—moving ever further out. Include people distant from you; even people you see as against you. Then, beyond all the circles in the space that contains every one of them, write in big capital letters: GOD.

Now, go back to the dot that is you and imagine a line going outward. What's required here is honesty and soul-searching, because the line should only extend as far as you feel is true—only as far as the people you really care about.

Very often I've felt my line doesn't get nearly as far as I know it should. As ministers, it is our job to be interested in many, many people—and it's a beautiful job. But we can ask:

Does our line of interest go far enough? Is it deep enough? Does it take in all that it could? Jesus' line went all the way.

Spiritual progress lies in our ability to feel we are taking care of our dear self, that single dot—as we honor our true kinship with all other people and things. For over thirty years I have studied Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the great American poet and educator Eli Siegel. From him I learned that the biggest opposition to feeling a sense of kinship with others is the desire in us for contempt, which he defined as “the lessening of what is different from oneself as a means of self-increase as one sees it.”

Contempt is as ordinary as not listening with all of oneself when another person talks. It is also the cause of every injustice, including racism. And it can make for the greatest of horrors, like the attacks on America that occurred on September 11.

The people on those doomed flights were not REAL to the hijackers. The thousands of persons who kissed their loved ones goodbye as they left for work at the World Trade Center that fateful morning, who sipped coffee at their desks or planned their vacations or upcoming wedding, were not REAL to these men. Their mission was to maim and destroy people they saw only as different from themselves, and less than themselves.

Certainly the persons responsible for this heinous attack should be found and punished. But it would be foolish and wrong for us to think that bombs and commando teams are the solution to this crisis.

Ellen Reiss, the Class Chairman of Aesthetic Realism, explains in the international periodical *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, and in a nationally televised public service film:

“Through the attack on our nation . . . we are seeing that what goes on elsewhere in the world affects us intensely: we are connected to other people. We can no longer feel snugly apart from an anger of someone far away. That we are related to other people is something to see with a feeling of pride, kindness, love; and we certainly should not have been forced to acknowledge it amid terror. . . . The persons who attacked this nation in September of 2001 were monumentally vicious. But we need to ask: Is there...an anger at the United

States, which others, who are not necessarily vicious, have? And did the anger at the U.S. which millions of people throughout the world have, enable those attackers to thrive, to be not adequately opposed? . . . We need, for the safety of our beloved country, to think about people everywhere this way: ‘Here’s a person—real as I am. What, as [Eli] Siegel put it, does he or she “deserve by being a person”?’<sup>2</sup>

I believe Jesus would love that question. Even as he was a fierce critic of injustice, he also had a tremendously beautiful desire to understand and see the depths of other people as real. Wherever injustice has been opposed, this sense of deep kinship with others is to be found.

One man who stands out in history because he did have a profound awareness of his relation to others is

Frederick Douglass who, having early escaped the clutches of slavery, went on to fight bravely in the Abolitionist cause. There was a time Douglass took his fight against slavery to Ireland, where he tried to rally public opinion there to support the cause. But in Ireland he saw suffering too; rotted potato crops and devastating famine. As the well heeled made their way to his anti-slavery lectures, Douglass watched with mounting indignation as he saw them walk coldly past shivering mothers huddled outside with starving babies in their arms. In a letter to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass wrote:

“He who really and truly feels for the American slave, cannot steel his heart to the woes of others; and he who thinks himself an abolitionist, yet cannot enter into the wrongs of others, has yet to find a true foundation for his anti-slavery faith.”<sup>3</sup>

Douglass was a man who felt deeply We and Our rather than Me and Mine.

In *Self and World*, Eli Siegel writes, in sentences that have been tremendously valuable to me as a person and a pastor:

We all of us start with a here, ever so snug and ever so immediate. And this here is surrounded strangely, endlessly, by a there. We are always meeting this there: in other words, we are always meeting what is not ourselves, and we have to do something about it. We have to be ourselves, and give to this great and diversified there, which is not ourselves, what it deserves. This means we have to be personal and impersonal, snug and exterior. If we do

this successfully, whether we know it or not, we have arrived at a beauty which is efficient; at aesthetic good sense.”<sup>4</sup>

What is necessary is not sacrificially to submerge our individuality, our “Me.” We need to feel we are an individual by being related.

For many years, even in college thinking of studying for the ministry, I had a narrow, truncated view of the world. I didn’t see the feelings of other people as real as my own and I learned this was one of the chief reasons I disliked myself and questioned the authenticity of my religious emotion. I could speak with somebody and be sympathetic. But too often, when the conversation ended, so too did my thought about that person. So I will be forever grateful to God for what I have learned from Aesthetic Realism—and for how my life has changed in these years. My care for people is deeper now and it goes much further—even as I know I need to change more—and want to.

When we accept any limitation in what we feel we owe to the humanity for which God laid down his life in Christ—certainly we hurt others, but we also cripple ourselves. The beauty of Christ’s life—and its greatness—lies in the fact that he did not put a limit on what was going to affect him or who he was going to be fair to. His self-expression was his justice to others and to God.

How much of the world is Jesus asking us to include? It is his daily expectation for us that we will say in our hearts, and back up with our lives, not Me and Mine but We and Our. □

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted for this insight concerning our Lord’s prayer to Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Riverside Sermons*, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1958 p. 229

<sup>2</sup> Reiss, Ellen; *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*; Number 1485, September 19, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Foner, Philip S. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years 1817-1849*, NY: International Publishers, 1950 p. 141

<sup>4</sup> Siegel, Eli; *Self and World*, NY: Definition Press, 1981, p. 91



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