

Herod's Children. January 27, 2019

It's an unseasonable date for this sermon. It sounds as if it should have happened closer to the 6th of January, not the 27th, but, sad to say, human cruelty is not restricted to any particular season. Herod's children refers to the story in Matthew of the Wise Men's visit at Jesus' nativity. They first made a courtesy call on Herod, the king of Palestine, a client king, put there by the Romans to keep the people in line with the Roman Empire. Herod was not pleased to hear that the trip these Magi were making was to give homage to a newborn king of the Jews, since he *was* the king of the Jews. We can all see how that would have been a little disconcerting. But, in the story at least, he sent them on their way, asking only that they send him news of where this new king was, probably rubbing his hands, twirling his mustachios, and laughing in the way villains have traditionally laughed. As we know, the Wise Men were smart guys and they didn't go back to report to Herod and so Herod had all boys two and under killed by his soldiers.

This is a horrible story, and it's hard to include it in the traditional Christmas theme of light and love coming to the earth. But it is part of the human story and so needs to be told as well. It is not an isolated story of extreme cruelty. The massacre of innocents is well attested in the Bible, in the histories of the Assyrians, in the stories of the Crusades, pick an era, pick a war, and collateral damage, as it's now

called, is part of the picture. It might be easier to find a time in which this does not occur than a time in which it does.

My interest in this was sparked by the book *Asperger's Children: the Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna* by Edith Sheffer. The horrors of genocide directed at Jews have been long known, though, like many other horrors, many professed ignorance of the fact both at the time and even now. Many know that, in addition to Jews, the Roma people and Slavic people were also defined as less than human and also were targets of elimination. When genocide is the agenda, the age of the victims does not matter. Children are to be exterminated because extermination has everything to do with who one is, not what one has done. It has to do with eliminating, not individuals but a category. The first step in this is to set aside some group or another as less than human and then define them as dangerous or debilitating to the 'real' humans. This seldom works unless there is some sort of pre-existing cultural myth among the dominant population, a myth that is embedded in the population, a myth that involves seeing certain people as belonging to a category that can be defined as subhuman. The myth that Jews were somehow both inferior and dangerous was well embedded in Europe—and the United States—long before Hitler came to power. It was a myth that saturated Austria, perhaps more than Germany, and so, when Hitler annexed Austria, he found a willing population to carry out the Austrian part of the Holocaust.

There were other myths as well, other myths about inferiority. The first is that people are readily divided up into categories. This is the myth that keeps racism alive now. Despite the fact that there is no biological evidence that humans are able to be categorized by race, despite the fact that people are more different within these arbitrarily defined categories than they are across them, many are unable to see that these categories are human created and have no basis in reality. Fear and insecurity destroy critical thought. Once the genie of slicing up the world into 'us' and 'them' is let loose, it is a seductive genie, indeed.

Of all the crimes of which humanity has been guilty, it is hard to think of worse than the murder of children. Not only are innocents deprived of the chance of life, it is so horrible to think of adults, those charged with the care and nurturance of children, those whom children should look to for protection, betraying that trust in the most extreme way possible. How could anyone do that, we say. And it is particularly repugnant to think of it being done in cold blood. And yet that is just what Hans Asperger, a noted child psychologist, as well as other professionals made decisions as to which child was fit to live and which was not. His name is now most famous for identifying the syndrome for a type of autism that now bears his name. That was a small part of his work and it was a part of his work that he used in order to sort those children, primarily boys, whom he felt were worthy of life though they had come to the attention of the authorities for

some sort of misdemeanor. His depiction of them as benefitting from therapy, and then being able to benefit the Nazi state, kept them alive. He didn't find girls worthy of such intervention.

Like so many of the ways in which language itself was perverted by the Nazis to disguise evil, the murder of disabled children was no exception. It was carried out in an institution called The Curative Education Clinic, where Asperger and others diagnosed and labeled children. It was on the basis of their recommendations that some children lived while others, considered irredeemable, were killed.

We recoil at the sort of monster who could knowingly and willingly kill children. The monsters themselves recoiled at it as well. But it is possible to rationalize the worst of actions and in this they were assisted by the very system of labels and diagnosis that was developed, ironically, in an attempt to help children and their families. Social service under the Weimar republic, well intentioned but set up the system which was then exploited by the Nazis. As the author of *Asperger's Children* says of this double-edged sword:

The politics of child development work were knotty, entangling the rights of the child, the family, and the perceived good to society. but state-supervised child rearing had support across the political professionals from varied backgrounds experimented with methods

that included both liberal and authoritarian practices, and both positive and negative eugenics....

Whatever the political aims, though, it is clear that state intervention had both the potential to help children and, as Austria slid into fascism and the Third Reich, the potential for catastrophic harm.

The system of child welfare, devised during the liberal government that preceded the Nazi regime, was well intended. It set up systems of intervention in situations in which it felt children were at risk. It was supported and staffed by the most far thinking professionals at the time. And it depended heavily on identifying and labeling children and families as well as setting up a system that could alert authorities to these families. It was often bitterly resented by the poor who saw it as officious and demeaning in its attempts to control their families. And, when the Nazis came to power, it was this very system that enabled the child welfare professionals such as Hans Asperger to identify those children that they felt were drains on state resources and so should be eliminated.

We must be careful when we wish to do good, careful and self-aware so that the very programs we think will help do not become the weapons wielded against the very people we seek to help. To avoid this, it becomes necessary to listen to those whom we seek to help rather than to assume that we know more about them

than they do themselves. And, above all, we need to see beyond the labels and types that we create to see the humanity of those we wish to serve.

Categorization keeps us able to compartmentalize, to keep the worst guilt and complicity away. In a system heavily dependent on putting people in pigeonholes, categories become more important than people. Individual differences, people's hopes, fears, desires, and gifts, become lost when people are assumed to be a certain way because of the label that is put on them. The category becomes more important than the person. Assumptions, usually negative ones, replace understanding.

Think of the myriad ways that people are labeled; welfare recipient, self-made millionaire, single mother, family man, white, black, Asian, Mexican, Muslim, Catholic, developmentally disabled, genius. The list is endless. With each one of these words, we form a picture, an idea of who that person is. With each of these words, we rank people in ways that let us feel deeply for them—or not. In a society as diverse, as large, as impersonal as ours, this is perhaps inevitable. It is a way of understanding people when we have no way to know people face to face, as happens in a smaller, more intimate community. Unfortunately, when we think through categorizing people, these labels are able to be distorted, given different meanings, played with by those who have the power to give meaning for their own

purposes. The media, heavily influenced by money, becomes our way of understanding. We see through other's eyes, not our own.

What can we do? As our country becomes more unequal, as money increasingly determines political policy, we can often despair at our ability to bring about a more human, democratic, merciful society. We can often despair when we see the amount of casual cruelty around us. But there is always something we can do or, perhaps more to the point, always something we can be. We can resist the pull toward division, the pull toward dividing those fit to live over those not fit to live. We can confront in ourselves our own systems of categorization and our identification with different categories that make us more sympathetic to one type of human beings over another, no matter what that category is.

We can also strip from our eyes those blinders that keep us from seeing how slow, invisible child massacres take place in our own midst. We may not see the carnage, but policies to deprive people of medical care, of adequate nutrition, of adequate education, of a humane and restorative justice system, those policies kill as well as any bullet.

Children do not ask to be born to a particular situation or to a particular family. Or, if they do as some philosophies aver, this kind of philosophy should

never, in my view, be used as a reason to condone the kinds of deprivation that are occurring with more frequency today.

We have our thoughts toward many categories of people subtly altered by the circumstances in which we live, the way in which we were raised, and the ways in which our thoughts are directed by others. It is our task, as freethinking people, people dedicated to critical thought, to be mindful of the ways in which these manipulations of our minds are carried out every day. Do we feel, even if we do not admit, that the death of a mentally disabled child is less a tragedy than the death of an able child? Do we worry about children caught in the danger of gunfire in their own neighborhoods? Are we shocked at reports that up to 40% of children in upstate cities are entitled to free lunches because their household income is so low? Are we horrified when children die in our government's care? Do we weep for the children of Syria, killed by the hundreds? Or do we dismiss this because it is 'those people', people who are not us or our families who are affected? Do we try to find reasons why it is somehow 'those people's' fault that their families are so poor? Do we look closer at the history and economics that drives the lives of many we dismiss easily? Do we look closer at the history and economics that drives the lives of many we dismiss easily? Do we accept this as an inevitable part of an inevitable system? Or do we say as Martin Luther King said, that "there are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted."

Maladjustment keeps us on the outside. Maladjustment keeps us from being lulled into seeing only in a comfortable range of vision. The citizens of Germany and Austria were citizens of the most advanced countries in the world. They would never have considered themselves heir to the atrocities of the ancient world, such as Herod's slaughter of Jewish children. They were Christians, in the twentieth century, educated people, believers in the benefits of modern medical science. Dr. Asperger and many other well educated people became Herod's children. Human nature contains a range of responses, but one response is to believe what people in power tell us and to adjust to that. That is why maladjustment is so important.

I would like to let Eric Sheffer, son of the author of *Asperger's Children*, thirteen years old when the book was written and diagnosed with autism when he was 17 months old, have the next to last words. He says:

Autism is not real; we all have issues. However, some are more noticeable than others. Autism is not a disability or diagnosis, it is a stereotype for certain individuals. People with autism should be treated like everyone else, because if they are not, it will make them be even less social. Parents of all children, whether or not they are autistic, should think of their children's perspective and help their children based on their perspectives.

If we are to survive, I think we need to remember that all children are, truly, our children. We need to be good parents to all, because we are all on a very small,

very interlinked world. We need to be wise when we use categories, when we label people, when we determine their fates based on these labels. Because we do not want the next generation to say that we were Asperger's children.

And now, what do you think?