

# Transforming Our Fear of Others to Love for Others

The eulogist at a recent family funeral recalled the lyrics of an old hymn by Charles Meigs simply titled "[Others](#)."

Expressed as a prayer, the hymn asks to be absorbed by a concern for others in thought and deed, placing their well-being ahead of self-centered attention.

The words were a fitting description and tribute to the life being celebrated, a beloved matriarch and aunt for several generations of an expanding family. Her life was truly lived for others.

The hymn originally appeared in "Consecrated Hymns" of 1902 and was preserved in the old Broadman Hymnal of 1940.

I don't know how or why it dropped out of the revisions of modern hymnals, but it seems to have disappeared along with the perspective and spirit to which it points.

In 2016, Dictionary.com selected "xenophobia" as its word of the year, noting the fear of others as a key feature of much of the public discourse in the campaigns of that year.

It is hard to tell whether the hold of xenophobia is loosening or tightening on our collective consciousness, but it does seem to be maintaining traction as an effective component of political strategy.

“Others” who can be identified by race, religion, nationality, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation and ideological perspective become easy targets for rhetoric in search for a common enemy in appeals for a restricted understanding of community.

The persistent appeal of “religious liberty” in legislative proposals reflects xenophobia’s subtle presence.

In spite of the clear protections of religious freedom in the First Amendment, these not-so-carefully-disguised efforts seek to offer legal protection to discrimination toward certain “others.”

The liberty being sought by such legislation is the freedom to have priority for one’s own perspective no matter what the cost to others. It is hard not to see the “one’s-own-religion centeredness” of these proposals.

Hostility toward “others” has deep roots, even in the covenant faith tradition. The biblical testimony has plenty of examples of violent treatment of others, even in obedience to God.

The pages of the covenant history are stained with the blood of violent treatment of enemies.

But the longer-range vector of ethical consciousness reflected in that testimony clearly points to a spirit of love and justice toward others in the human family.

The refinements of that consciousness by both the historians and the prophetic voices of Israel lean toward the “new commandment” of Jesus: “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34-35) - even to the point of loving one’s enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The invitation of the covenant testimony is to a transformation from the fear of others to the love of others - from “xenophobia” to “xenophilia,” perhaps.

One of the clearest and most concrete expressions of ethics centered on the well-being of others is in Paul’s guidance to the Corinthian Christians.

Paul is responding to a concern about the exercise of freedom from various dietary restrictions, where different levels of understanding of that freedom were causing stress and confusion in the community.

In doing so, he affirmed their freedom, but cautioned, “Be careful lest this freedom of yours becomes an obstacle to those who do not feel as free as you” (1 Corinthians 8).

Be guided, he said, not just by what you believe is right, but also by the impact of your decisions and behaviors on the lives of others with whom you share the journey.

Let's not forget that this counsel comes from one who only a few years earlier had "sincerely held beliefs" about what was right that led him to enforce those beliefs violently upon "others" who did not share them (Acts 8:1 and 9:1-2).

In the biblical portrait of the faith journey, exclusive tribal identity slowly gives way to a more inclusive understanding of community.

This pilgrimage is one of growing into that expanding consciousness. The temptations of security and privilege that seek to hold on to the certainties and comfort provided by the earlier stages are constrictions that are difficult to loosen.

Fear is a natural component of that challenge, and there will always be those who will seek to exploit that natural fear for purposes that are not aligned with the portrait of what human community can be as the collective image of God.

But, as the affirmation that "love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) reminds us, embracing the "otherness" of the human family in love is the transformative function that aligns us with the vision of what the community of God's children can be.

Maybe someday before long, "xenophilia" will be the word of the year. Let's stay tuned and hope.