

Representing the Poor

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One aspect of globalisation is what some scholars call cosmopolitanism. This refers to the supposed creation of a highly integrated, mobile, and transnational culture where people around the world interact with diverse peoples on common grounds, under the supposition that within this tightly-bound, globalized world ? all humans are united. Media, communications, high-speed travel, and other global interconnections feed (and perhaps create) the impression that we live in a ?small world after all? (here an annoying song begins playing in my head).

Now is not the time to explore whether such a thing as cosmopolitanism exists (or, if it would be more accurate to speak of ?global cultures?); nor to analyze how it might be appropriated in different contexts. I only want to talk about some aspects of the ?small world? feeling. Television (think Discovery Channel, or the BBC) as well as church-related ministries (short terms missions) provide avenues for mostly Western people to gain exposure into diverse humans around the world ? including many people trapped in poverty.

Since other blogs in this collection have focused upon definitions for ?wealth? and ?poverty? I will simply refer to these things in general terms with the hope that no one would be offending by my simplistic (and unfortunately, binary) usage of the terms.

Initially, exposure to other people requires a certain degree of representation. Media is not value neutral, and even when humans interact privately with each other they interpret and re-interpret a vast supply of verbal and non-verbal images ? ultimately, drawing upon these to ?represent? the other.

Representation entails a certain amount of power. Sometimes we think of these things as restricted to the elite (or wealthy) since they are the ones with sufficient ?powers? to represent others, and especially in relation to the poor or powerless. American Christians travel to remote corners of the world with cameras and bring back memory cards full of images to show their local congregation. A BBC reporter captures a severe case of famine, along with vivid stories that show people suffering under unimaginable circumstances. YouTube, blogs (like this one) and other technological mechanisms make it possible to quickly link to a video, picture, or write a caption on Facebook in order to portray another human being. Sometimes we represent the worst of humanity for the purposes of raising funds and/or to elicit strong feelings of pity, or guilt; other times we represent the best of humanity in order to create heroes, or idols.

However, a broader discussion of these themes must acknowledge that poor people also ?represent? the wealthy; albeit their ?representations? don?t utilize the same resources, nor occupy the same stages. People living in poverty have power to ?imagine? the lives of wealthy people, and to create new stereotypes, and/or reinforce old ones that place the wealthy in immanently bounded categories or caricatures.

As people who affirm the Christian doctrine of creation, we believe that ?representation? stands central to what it means to be human. We ?image? God. We also ?image? one another. In the same way that ?imaging? God requires fidelity to the source of representation (the character of God), faithful ?imaging? of others necessitates intimate knowledge and authenticity (yet not at the risk of undermining healthy forms of creativity).

Scripture is replete with examples of representation. In the following, I will limit myself to healthy forms, but it must be acknowledged that many damaging examples could also be listed.

Yahweh speaks to Samuel and tells him, ?Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have

rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. (1 Sam. 16:7) Or when speaking through the prophets, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6)

Jesus praises the faith of a Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28), and marvels at the confidence shown by a centurion (Lk 7:1-10). He surrounds himself with children, and says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Lk 18:17).

The Apostle Paul describes what this kind of representation might look like if enacted with love: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." (Rom 12:9-13) And then a little later, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." (verse 15).

James illustrates how our image of God relates to the image we have of others: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be." (James 3:9-10)

These "representations" involve more than static or idealized images of people. When Jesus draws his arms around the children, he is not trying to inculcate guilt or pity within his followers so that more funds can be raised for an orphanage. When he marvels at the faith of the centurion, he is not writing a book about a super-human accomplishing extraordinary things, so that it might become a bestseller. These representations are instead examples of the kingdom of God set within everyday circumstances. His eyes are ever-searching "looking for the good (the Real) within human frames of existence. When he finds beauty (in any shape or form), he identifies it (making it more real, in the process).

What does this mean for how the wealthy represent the poor (or, how the poor represent the wealthy)?

? Faithfulness to God's image requires faithfulness to how we image other people. The two belong together.

? We need to advocate for the poor, "or the wealthy. The advocacy must probe deep into such internal issues such as "how we think about the poor (or wealthy)." Healthy forms of representation should bring people together, not in some artificial sense where we blithely proclaim, "we are all the same;" but where we share gifts, material blessings, and extend our lives (participative, self-representations) for corporate growth.

? We need to look for God's beauty "faith, hope, humility, and faithfulness (among others) " wherever it might be found. Jesus was "amazed" by the faith of the centurion. He held up children as examples of how to receive the kingdom of God. God's goodness is not privileged to a particular socio-economic class (but cannot be divorced from such issues). We need eyes of faith to accurately represent one another "for each other.

? Representation involves power. It is incumbent upon all of us (the rich and the poor) to use our "powers of representation" to promote kingdom values. Manufactured guilt (or pity) rarely, if ever, results in anything constructive. Elevating others as super humans brings the entire Body of Christ crashing down upon itself. Love, grace, service, and honor, on the other hand, demonstrate the generative nature of power.

To the extent that "it's a small world after all," it is imperative that we cultivate the ethics of representation for how we think about, talk about, display video images about, and/or otherwise interact with others "but especially for the poor.

