

HOLISTIC GROWTH IN CHRIST

BY BILL VAMOS

Some time ago, I saw a Peanut's cartoon that reveals our common human longing for wholeness. We might call this a parable of holistic growth. Snoopy is lying face down on top of his doghouse. He says to himself, "I'm restless. I feel like going to the park..." Snoopy initiates a conversation with his body, by saying: "Let's take a vote on it..." In the next picture it's clear that the voting is very confusing and chaotic within him... His stomach sends him a direct message, to which Snoopy responds, "They don't have anything to eat there? Stomachs never want to go anyplace where you don't eat!" His nose gives him a message which is simply a question mark. Snoopy replies, "The nose never knows. How about the ears? All right, ears, pay attention!" But Snoopy is aware that the ears are not with him, He says, "That's the trouble with ears, they never listen. Do you want to go to the park or don't you?" The ears reply, "If there's a band playing." Snoopy says, "If there's a band playing? How do I know if there's going to be a band playing?" Finally exasperated, he thinks to himself, "There's no use in even asking the feet. Feet always want to stay at home." Having had his fill of all this discussion, Snoopy jumps off the doghouse, proclaiming, "I don't care what any of you say. We're going to the park. I'm still in charge." The cartoon concludes with Snoopy dancing along in the park, a broad smile on his face, saying to himself, "It never fails. They all complain about going, but after we get here, they all have a good time."

Snoopy's difficulty is indicative of the situation in which we all find ourselves, and so does the world in which we live. We yearn for wholeness. The biblical faith deals creatively with an yearning. For example, Paul's Letter to the Ephesians shows God's way of healing the divisions within us, and with our society. Ephesians 1:9, 10 (N.E.B.) "he has made known to us his hidden purpose—such was his will and pleasure determined beforehand in Christ – to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ."

That truth clearly is not apparent as we view the world in which we live. On the surface the world's message is simple, direct and devastating: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." It takes a special kind of perception to see into and to see through the world to the risen, unifying presence of Christ, relentlessly drawing people together.

It takes inward eyes, "The eyes of the heart," Paul calls them (Eph. 1:18). With those eyes, we can see Jesus; we can see just what kind of Friend He is, not only to us, but to everyone. Jesus did not allow the brokenness of life to cut Him off from either God or us.

He got angry, as we do. People's greed and egotism hurt him to the point of tears, tears that come when other people let us down. He felt disappointment. He wanted to give up. But He let all of these experiences be part of His relationship with God and with us. And there is more to it....

Christ Jesus also allowed us to drive a wedge between ourselves and God and each other by killing Him. Paul also says, (1:7), “Our release is secured... through the shedding of Christ’s blood.” When Jesus died and then rose from the dead, division and disunity were stripped of their real power. It is now true that no matter how much we divide ourselves within or trample and destroy each other, all we can possibly accomplish by these actions is to provide God with unbelievable opportunities to create the unity of His universe.

And this is not a naïve notion that evil is actually good. No, evil remains, with its ugly greed, its cruel violence and its deafening apathy. The difference, since Jesus died and rose from the dead, is that evil has lost the power to win.

Verse 3 of Ephesians Chapter Four says, “Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.”

Note that the Spirit is the One who gives unity. The same Spirit of Christ fills each one who knows Him. What we usually miss when we consider the theme of Christian unity is the inward unity that Christ gives each individual person. Being one with each other parallels the fact that Christ makes each of us one with ourselves. We need more than an open group which welcomes and affirms us. Each of us also need a self which is learning to welcome and love the inner selves within one’s own being. In fact, in Christ personal wholeness actually feed the unity of the world.

Gordon Cosby, pastor of The Church of the Savior, in Washington, DC, has a sermon on the fourteenth Chapter of the Gospel of Luke. He begins by reflecting on the first 14 verses, which include Jesus saying to the host at a meal that the people who are most properly to be invited to a party are the poor and the crippled, the lame and the blind. Gordon Cosby says that this refers not only to people within society but to the selves within each one of us. Here’s the way he puts it: “We are to go searching for the poor, the despised, (and) the rejected self within, for it is there that we meet the Savior and become whole...I think we start with the lost (selves) within and not try to judge those selves...(By saying): I’m stupid...I’m dumb...I’ve goofed up...I’m worthless...I’m unattractive...all the ways in which we judge this inner crowd...(Instead we need to say): I’m going to enlarge my invitation list. I’m going to enlarge the list of those invited to the banquet of my own life. I’m going to leave no one out: all are invited. I’m going to embrace the crowd...I’m going to welcome it all, especially the weak and neglected dimensions of my inner life. Christ the Lover says that He loves all of the inner me, and I will try to believe Him.”

When we do let Christ embrace our inner being, whether that be by means of solitude and prayer and silence, worship, opening up to another person, or all of those and more, He can give us victory over the dark places within. They are not violently destroyed, they are befriended and changed. And when such personal wholeness grows, it has an effect on the unity of the world. For our own inner openness and healing can help to conquer our prejudice toward others, and to overcome our blind judgments of other people – and

other nations. Inner wholeness is meant to make us more open to the needs and injustices of society.

(Meditate on a time when this has been true for you – or – if nothing comes, just enjoy this time of quietness.)

In Christ personal wholeness helps to create group unity. And the reverse is also true. In Christ group cohesiveness feeds personal wholeness. Any time we give ourselves to another or receive another's gift of self, God's life enters us. That's part of what Paul means when he writes in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 3: "Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together." The Spirit of the living Christ is one who is always drawing people together. One man told of the way Christ has fostered an attitude of permanent inclusion in his church. He said, "I think of my church as my family. Several of my fellow church members are the people I go to when my life is fractured and need mending. I lean on them for support and they hold me. I tell them my joys and we celebrate together. Whether in prayer or in ministry to others, we know we belong to each other. In that belonging, I find wholeness!"

That's the bond of peace pulling us together.

Group unity feeds personal wholeness. That reality moves beyond the church to the world. Ephesians 4 includes all of humanity in the sweep of Christ's unifying power. Verse 6 of that chapter says this: "There is one God and Father of all mankind, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all." We connect with God when we minister to His world.

Some people have said that they got in touch with their own inward poverty at the moment when they actually touch the poverty in the world around them (and it could have been only a few blocks away). For them, the healing of self and the healing of part of society came at one and the same time.

(Meditate on a time when your caring for another person, or for one segment of the world's pain has also ministered to you and your need for wholeness.)

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul affirms that when we root ourselves in communion with God in Christ and persistently receive His love, then such holistic living can become our lifestyle: "Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together," (Ephesians 4:3), because "God has made known to us His hidden purpose...namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ." (Ephesians 1:9-10).