

Spiritual Intelligence

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“[I]f this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. . . .” – Acts 5:38-39

Anybody here this morning know what their IQ is? I don't, because I don't think I've ever taken an IQ test and I don't intend to take one now.

What about your EQ? I don't know if there's a test to measure emotional intelligence, but if there is, I don't intend to take that one, either. That's another number I'd prefer not to have affixed to my identity.

And what about SQ, the measure of your spiritual intelligence? If we could put spiritual intelligence on a scale of say 0 to 100, where do you think you'd fall? What about your spouse? What about your kids?

With so much talk these days about spirituality, I got to wondering about what constitutes spiritual intelligence or even if such a thing exists. I'm inclined to think that it does, and the story of Rabbi Gamaliel that Barb and I read a little while ago is one of the reasons I think there is such a thing as spiritual intelligence. Let's have a closer look at that story.

Some of Jesus's apostles are causing trouble in the Jerusalem temple because they insist on telling his story. They believe that what God did in Jesus – the virgin birth, the miracles, the resurrection, the whole thing – is proof that the Messiah for whom Jews had been waiting for centuries had arrived.

Other Jews weren't convinced, and so the people whose job it was to keep the peace told the apostles to stop fomenting unrest. Peter, as you heard in our lesson from Acts, couches the apostles' teaching as a matter of conscience: God has told Peter and the others to tell the story of Jesus, and they have to obey that divine authority rather than human – even well-meaning human – authority. And so they go on causing trouble.

Since a warning and some jail time hasn't solved the problem, the council is provoked to put the trouble-makers to death, but before they can carry out that sentence, Rabbi Gamaliel speaks up and says, in effect, “Hold on a minute. If this Jesus movement is a human construct, we've got plenty of historical examples to suggest that it'll fall apart on its own. Self-proclaimed messiahs come and go, and their movements rise and fall with them. But if this excitement around Jesus is God's doing, don't get in the way, because not only will you not be able to stop this movement, you'll also be seen to be on the wrong side of God. So leave these characters alone.”

Rabbi Gamaliel's advice carried the day, more or less. The council couldn't resist a little flogging as they released Peter and his colleagues, just to make a point, but the attempt by one group of Jews to silence another group of Jews by killing them was averted.

There are lots of things we could take from this story, but what has always struck me about it is the way the book of Acts, a Christian writing, portrays a Jewish rabbi, in this case, Gamaliel the Elder. We don't know much about Rabbi Gamaliel. He appears twice in the New Testament, both times in the book of Acts. In chapter 22, Paul speaks proudly of having been a student of Rabbi Gamaliel as proof of his deep Jewish learning and piety.

The great collection of Jewish biblical commentary known as the Mishnah says that when Rabbi Gamaliel died the glory of the Torah ceased. So he was obviously held in great esteem by his fellow Jews, including, apparently, those Jews who were followers of Jesus. And it appears to have been Rabbi Gamaliel's spiritual generosity during this incident with Peter and his colleagues that earned him his place in the collection of Christian writings that we call the New Testament.

It's that spiritual generosity that has always struck me as worth paying attention to in this story. We're not, it seems to me, in a spiritually generous age. There's a lot of talk about spirituality, of course, but I'm not seeing much of it in the way we interact with one another, and that's why I think Rabbi Gamaliel has something to teach us Christians. Rabbi Gamaliel, it seems to me, has displayed a kind of spiritual intelligence that commends itself to all of us, and I'd like for us to give some thought to what spiritual intelligence might look like, based on Rabbi Gamaliel's actions. Three things stand out as I look at this great sage's spiritual intelligence, and I'd like for us to look at them a little more closely. The first is his recognition of the divine; the second is his awareness of his place in history; and the third is his trust in divine providence. These aren't the things that you'll find in most lists of the traits of spiritual intelligence, but I think they're worth looking at this morning.

Let's start by taking a poke at Professor Richard Dawkins, who's made himself a target of preachers like me by his defense of atheism and his denigration of religious faith as a delusion – he calls religion “a fixed false belief.” I don't think Professor Dawkins, for all his admittedly vast intelligence, is a spiritually intelligent person. Spirituality, for Professor Dawkins, is nothing more than human wishful thinking – that is, emotion – or psychological projection. There is no objective reality that we can call God. There's only stuff. Lots and lots of stuff, and it's all material. There's nothing spiritual about it. There's no God up there in heaven or way out there in space. The idea of a spiritual reality, including god, is simple fantasy for Professor Dawkins and our atheist friends.

It's possible they're right, of course – let me be spiritually generous enough to admit at least that possibility – but I don't think they are. The fact that we haven't been able to find God under a microscope or at the end of a telescope is no proof to me that God doesn't exist. I believe in God in the same way that I believe that there are lots of things beyond our first-hand, observable knowledge. When scientists estimate that there are about 200 billion galaxies in the observable universe, they haven't counted them and they haven't observed them; they've calculated them, which makes those planets nothing more than very well-educated guesses.

God, it seems to me, works in very much the same way. We calculate God's existence, if you will, not because we've seen God but because we've seen the evidence of God. Atheists like Professor Dawkins say we're seeing the evidence of a bang; we religious people say we're seeing the evidence of what caused the bang. No scientist in the world has been able to answer the simple question that launches all religion, which is, Why is there something and not nothing? That's the God question for which God is also the answer.

When your conception of God starts there – with all of that stuff, with all of that time, with all of that space, and with all of that scientific work – you're going to have a pretty big concept of God. Yours will not be the narrow, tribal, parochial deity that has been the Achilles heel of so much religion. The New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips wrote a little book many years ago entitled *Your God Is Too Small*, in which he addressed this issue of all the little versions of God we Christians have created that do us no intellectual credit and bring no glory to God.

Spiritually intelligent people know that God is really, really big – so big, in fact, that the word is meaningless applied to God – and that any conception of God which is to do justice to the idea has to be equally capacious. That doesn't mean vague or casual, which is the mistake we liberals make, but it does mean that you can't create God in your own image and expect people to take such a God seriously. It's clear from our story in Acts that Rabbi Gamaliel's conception of God was both broad and deep, as all the best conceptions of God are.

A second characteristic of spiritual intelligence is an awareness of one's place in history and tailoring one's actions to that awareness. If recognizing the divine is the transcendent element of spiritual intelligence, recognizing one's historical context is the mundane element of spiritual intelligence, and both, it seems to me, are found in spiritually intelligent people.

As all of us know, the silly season has started as one politician after another declares his or her candidacy for president of the United States, even though the election is over a year away. Politicians, as a type, are keenly aware of their historical moment, and the most successful among them seize that moment without hesitation. Even though many of us have been wondering what outrageous thing Donald Trump will say next, the fact of the matter is that he's leading in the polls and is farther ahead of the next candidate by a wider margin than separates any two of the other fifteen. So say what you want about his behavior or his hair, Donald Trump is aware that there are many Americans who feel as he does about things like immigration, the budget deficit, and national security. Donald Trump's poll numbers make it very clear that he's tapped into a pool of angry, alienated conservatives who feel that their white privilege – and his support is overwhelmingly white, male, and presumably straight – is being gradually chipped away. And they're right and it should be.

Spiritually intelligent people likewise sense the tenor of their times, but instead of exploiting need or longing in narrowly destructive ways, they challenge people to respond to change creatively – even change that they don't want.

When the prophet Jeremiah heard the false consolations of his contemporaries predicting a quick end to the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people, Jeremiah preached just the opposite. Build houses, he told the Jews longing to return to Israel, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Not only that, but he also told his fellow Jews to pray for the welfare of the city in which they were held captive, “for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” It takes spiritual intelligence to see that our welfare may rest in things we don't necessarily want.

Rabbi Gamaliel had lived through more than one failed insurrection against the Romans, and he knew better than most the self-destructive nature of violence. If history teaches us anything, it is that every military strong man succeeds only until a stronger man comes along, and Rabbi Gamaliel knew that the God of justice and peace is not served by imposing from without but rather by developing from within. All successful political revolutions begin with a spiritual transformation, and nothing in human history is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. And Rabbi Gamaliel was spiritually intelligent enough to know that only God knows when that hour has arrived.

The far-flung network of terrorists calling itself Islamic State will not ultimately win. Yes, they may be able for a time – perhaps for a long time – to impose their twisted version of Islam over much of the Islamic world, but sooner or later, the ordinary, everyday desire of ordinary women and men to live free from fear will begin to assert itself, and that desire – gently, gradually, and patiently – will, over time, overcome the pseudo-religious reign of terror of testosterone-addled boys with machine guns. All empires that impose their will by force fail, sooner or later, and both Islam and

Christianity have been down that road before. Those forays into domination didn't work then, they won't work now, and they'll never work, and the spiritually intelligent know this.

Finally, people who are spiritually intelligent trust in divine providence, which is another way of saying that they believe in God. Rabbi Gamaliel trusted that the God who had brought Judaism from nothing would preserve Judaism irrespective of the success or failure of the movement within it centered around Jesus. And he was right. Judaism adapted itself, in part under his leadership, to a more religiously pluralistic world once Christianity was born as a distinct religion, and Judaism did not disappear.

When you align yourself with the divine, you need not fear going out of business. In fact, you need not fear anything at all, as the writer of 1 John reminds us when he wrote that perfect love casts out fear. To love perfectly is to align one's life so closely with the divine that there is no gap between your will and God's will. As we sometimes sing in Edwin Hatch's famous hymn, "Breathe on me, breath of God, until my heart is pure. Until, with Thee, I will one will, to do and to endure."

Trusting in God's providence is not a glib optimism that everything will be fine. Things often do not turn out fine – cancers recur, surgeries go wrong, people drive under the influence and kill and maim. To trust in God's providence is to take the long view of life, much longer sometimes than any individual life. To trust in God's providence is to trust in the divine and purposeful love that was here long before any of us emerged from the primordial swamp in Eden and will be here long after all of us are gone.

Spiritually intelligent people know better than to try to measure the holy on a human scale; the idea would be laughable if so many people weren't doing it. We fashion our notions of God, convince ourselves and others that they're true in the way that the Civil War was true, and then we clutch them tightly to our breasts, tragically confusing God with our notions of God.

Spiritually intelligent people don't make that mistake. They believe devoutly – that is, trust unreservedly – in God rather than in their own thoughts or feelings about God. In other words, as the bumper sticker says, they let go and let God.

How do you fare, as far as spiritual intelligence goes? What would you give yourself as your SQ? 75? 95? 35? We know, now that people can change their IQ, a number that we once thought of as immutably innate. Isn't your SQ at least as important as your IQ?

Read again the story of Rabbi Gamaliel and ask yourself how you measure up to that sage's spiritual intelligence. Is your belief in God continuing to grow as you grow? Are you actively engaged as a person of faith with the world around you? Do you trust God enough to know when to let go or not bother in the first place?

Have a look. You might be surprised at what you find.