

Abundant Life: A Kin-dom Ethic of Flourishing

Amanda Udis-Kessler, May 29, 2021; written for the online LGBTQ+ Christian journal *Whosoever*; slightly updated June 12, 2022

I believe God is that essence in us that reaches out to another, committed to their well-being, their enlightenment, their moral, emotional, relational, and spiritual growth. (Phillip Gulley, *Unlearning God*, 2018, pp. 193-194)

Much has changed for me since I last wrote for *Whosoever* in 1999. Among other things, I have moved from being a Jesus-loving Unitarian Universalist (UU) to being a non-doctrinal, frequently stumbling Jesus follower in the United Church of Christ: still an outsider of sorts, but far more besotted with Jesus's vision of the Kin-dom of God and far more committed to trying to live it into being along with my fellow stumblers (LGBTQ+ or not, in all religious traditions and none).

I have recently developed what I call an ethic of flourishing, a way of thinking about morality that puts people above principles. This ethical approach began as a secular project, informed by my sociology training, my leftist feminism, and my identity and experiences as a queer bisexual androgynous white person who strives to work against white supremacy. It is now powerfully clear to me that this ethical project is in fact an inclusive Christian project in which the Kin-dom of God is a realm of flourishing and Jesus's command to love God, our neighbors, ourselves and our enemies is a command to support their and our flourishing and the flourishing of creation. This essay introduces the ethic of flourishing and suggests its value to inclusive Christianity.

All people, without exception, should have the opportunity to flourish, to have a good life. Ethically good acts are those that support our flourishing and the flourishing of others; ethically bad acts are those that contribute to otherwise avoidable suffering. This ethical approach puts the thriving of actual people ahead of principles such as freedom, equality, rights, or other abstractions, which can be used to cause suffering as well as flourishing. For example, minimal gun regulation in the US is a freedom that arguably has caused tremendous suffering and led to many deaths, whereas the freedom of same-sex couples to marry has led to tremendous flourishing for such couples and those who love them. The principle of freedom alone is insufficient to guide our morality; we need to know the consequences of specific freedoms for specific people with regard to flourishing or suffering. Put differently, principles are not ends-in-themselves but means to an end. That end is flourishing.

People can flourish or suffer as individuals or as members of groups that are more or less valued in society; heterosexism, for example, makes it harder for LGBTQ+ people to flourish and more likely that we will suffer. But all people flourish or suffer as human beings with certain basic attributes. Human beings are (among other things) social creatures, we are embodied, we have emotions, we have a need to make meaning of our lives, we are moral animals and we are spiritual beings. These aspects of humanity have implications for our flourishing and suffering:

- Socially, people flourish when they are treated well and can establish meaningful relationships. People suffer when they are shunned, isolated, devalued, or mistreated.

- Physically, people flourish when they are physically safe, have sufficient resources for bodily health (food, water, clean air, clothing, a place to live) and opportunities to use their bodies for pleasure and accomplishment. People suffer when their bodies are harmed, when they can't access resources for bodily health, and when they are restricted from using their bodies for efficacy and enjoyment.
- Emotionally, people flourish when they are free of fear and have unfettered access to the full range of their emotions, enjoying positive emotions and processing and releasing negative ones. People suffer when they are subjected to systematic fear or trauma, have deeply negative life experiences that limit joy and cause pain, or are unable to process and release negative emotions.
- As meaning-makers, people flourish when they can make sense of their lives and the world around them in ways that are empowering and positive and that provide guidance for action. People suffer when their lives don't make sense or only make sense in terms of negative experiences and understandings of the world.
- Morally, people flourish when they are empowered to live according to a moral code that makes sense to them and that leads them to treat themselves and others well. People suffer when the prevailing morality sees them as inherently immoral and unworthy of positive treatment or when they cannot live according to their own best moral understanding.
- Spiritually, people flourish when their lives are filled with gratitude, awe, wonder, humility, reverence, and other responses to being part of a larger story, community, or experience than just themselves. (This might be a religious story or community, but it need not be.) People suffer when they are cut off from such opportunities.

This way of thinking about flourishing and suffering can shape our personal ethical choices and our political and economic commitments. For example, all forms of systematic inequality, including class inequality, white supremacy, patriarchy, and cisheterosexism, make it impossible for certain people to flourish fully and makes it much likelier that they will suffer. And arguably all people are diminished in important ways by this suffering, even those who benefit from inequality.

An ethical commitment to the flourishing of all people is, therefore, an ethical commitment to end all forms of systematic inequality, even those forms of inequality from which we personally benefit. For example, my life is much easier as a white person in many ways, but it is easier precisely because life is much harder for people of color. If I believe that all people should have the chance to flourish, I am morally obligated to work against white supremacy.

Thus far, everything I've proposed fits into a secular framework but it also fits remarkably well into a progressive/inclusive Christian framework. The prophets lifted up freedom from violence (Isaiah 2:4) and from fear (Micah 4:4). Principles as means to the end of human flourishing is reminiscent of Jesus's claim that the sabbath was made for humankind and not the reverse (Mark 2:27). Jesus's two great commandments (Mark 12:28-34a) focus not on principles but on love: of the Holy, ourselves, and our neighbors (and of enemy; Matthew 5:44). Nations will take care of Jesus by taking care of the least of those among them (Matthew 25:31-46). The Johannine community understands Jesus to offer people not just life but *abundant* life (John 10:10). Jesus's practice of valuing people, healing them, feeding them, teaching them, and keeping an open table

that broke down status hierarchies shows his commitment to what I call human flourishing. And this commitment is in keeping with the prophetic Jewish tradition from which he emerged.

The early Jesus community helped the poor among them flourish (Acts 4:32, 34-37), argued that faith without works was dead (James 2:14-18), and claimed that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The epigraph to this essay, by progressive Christian pastor Phillip Gulley, takes the image of God as love and puts it to work in the service of human well-being.

Following Gulley, we might say that love is made manifest in the work we do and the relationships we build in support of our own flourishing and the flourishing of others. If “God is love” and love partakes of the Holy, then the work we do for our own flourishing and for the flourishing of others is holy work. If avoidable suffering is in a sense the opposite of flourishing, then the work we do to mitigate our own avoidable suffering and the avoidable suffering of others is also holy work:

- Loving God with all our being means working to enable God’s creation to flourish, including all people and the natural world, and working against suffering.
- Loving our neighbors as ourselves starts with loving ourselves, which means working for our flourishing and against our suffering.
- Loving our neighbors as ourselves means working for the flourishing and against the suffering of our neighbors – all of them.
- Following the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), we are called to show our enemies mercy which I translate as both wishing for them to flourish and working for their flourishing (and against their suffering) when and where this work is not at our own expense.

Lifting up an ethic of flourishing as a moral and spiritual demand made of inclusive Christians would have implications for our just peace and environmental work, of course, but also for our self-care, our spiritual and psychological development, our liturgical practices, our interfaith commitments, and indeed our entire lives. It would be a particular way of following Jesus involving both deep joy and substantial self-sacrifice, the cultivation of delight and of virtue. Perhaps such an ethic, if taken seriously by enough people, would contribute to moving all of us and our planet toward a life more abundant than we can imagine today. After all, nothing is impossible with love.