

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Is your world getting bigger or smaller? Who is my neighbor?

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Thanks to technology, our world is getting smaller. We can travel anywhere in the world in just a few hours. We can know what is happening around the world in just a few minutes, and we can communicate with people around the world in just seconds. This has exposed us to cultures, beliefs and ideas that have the opportunity of expanding our understanding and acceptance of the rich diversity in this world we share. So, while in terms of communication and travel, the world is getting larger and richer, and our awareness is getting larger and richer.

And yet, at the same time, our technology is also making it possible for us to live in a much smaller world of people who think and act just like us. We have moved away from shared understanding mediated through just three broadcast networks and a local printed press. Now, with hundreds of cable stations and thousands of websites, we have the opportunity to filter our understanding of the world through those sources with

which we agree.

Rather than being challenged to understand new ideas and be exposed to differing world views, we can listen and watch those outlets that reinforce our current beliefs and perception. It is sometimes called "living in an echo chamber."

At stake is our own identity. We tend to reinforce our identity by affiliation with those who are similar to us. It begins with family and spreads to our neighborhoods, which tend to bring together people of similar social and economic (and even racial) status. We join organizations and religious institutions where similarity is more obvious than diversity. It is natural to bond together with the "like-minded." It says to us, usually in a subconscious way, that we are normal, we are like others. It reinforces our identity.

But identity also tends to exclude. If there is an "us," then there must be a "them." If we bond with those like us, there must be threats from those not like us.

Our challenge is not to deny our identity, but to affirm it in continually expanding our world by interacting with those who are different.

In a recent interview with columnist

David Brooks, published in the magazine *Christian Century*, he warns against making politics the primary source of identity and meaning.

Brooks observes: "Most of the things that make our lives worthwhile and meaningful, do not have to do with politics. They have to do with relationships or beliefs or virtues. ... When we look back on our lives, we tend to think about our family, or our marriage, or maybe our vocation. We don't look back on this or that law that was passed. Sometime, our hysteria about politics is more damaging than what actually happens in politics. Some people see their political affiliation as a form of ethnicity. They can do violence to themselves with this identity."

In a similar vein, Yale professor and theologian, Miroslav Volf has said that "politics touches everything, but politics is not everything — not by a long shot."

I am not suggesting that what happens in the political arena is not important; I am only suggesting that it is not ultimate. The issues facing our society need to be seen through a lens of morality and justice, not just in political terms.

In the Christian worship tradition, it is

customary to have a prayer of confession. This past Sunday, the church I attend had this prayer of confession:

"Holy God, we often focus on the differences that drive a wedge between us and the other members of our global community. We dwell on the things that separate us instead of the things that bring us together. Change our perspectives so we see our differences in a positive light and in the ways they made us stronger. In your mercy Lord, hear our prayer."

Our identity need not be defined by how we look, how we dress, where we live, how we worship, or even how we vote. Our identity can be expanded out of whatever "echo chamber" we find ourselves. We can seek out the person who may seem different but in fact shares our human identity. We can be committed to our ideas but humble enough to be open to those who see the world in different ways.

We can continually seek to make our world bigger through our openness to others. We can love our neighbor and recognize, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, that our neighbor is often someone who is not just like us.