

A Wicked Problem
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I Corinthians 11: 23-26

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I'm reading an interesting book by George Marshal entitled, *Don't Even Think About It, How Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. In his book, Marshal describes the research that cognitive scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and linguists are doing to better understand why people either accept or reject climate change, and why it's so difficult for many people to respond to climate change, even if they do accept it.

One of the things I've learned from reading Marshal's book is that climate change is a "wicked problem." It's a real "mess."

Now you may think that "wicked problem" is the preferred term for climate change in Boston, Massachusetts. "It's so wicked hot out; climate change is becoming a real wicked problem."

Or you may think that calling climate change a "mess" is the result of lazy or sloppy thinking. Surely, I can think of a more sophisticated term than a "mess" to describe climate change.

But these are actual technical terms that academics and researchers are using to describe climate change. Climate change is a "wicked problem." Climate change is a "mess."

Horst Rittel, a design theorist and UC Berkeley professor coined the term "wicked problem" in the late '60s. Rittel and his colleague, Melvin Weber, further developed the concept in the early '70s. They originally used the term to describe highly complex and intractable problems in social planning, but others have developed the concept further and applied it to other highly complex problems that defy solutions.

So what is a "wicked problem," or a "mess?"

Here are some of the broad characteristics of a "wicked problem."

A "wicked problem" is a problem that effects a large number of stakeholders, but because the stakeholders cannot agree on how to define the problem, or on who or what is causing the problem, they cannot agree on how to solve it.

Different stakeholders, looking at the problem from different perspectives, define it in different ways, depending on their perspective, their relationship to it, their worldview, their moral compass, their value system, their interests, and so on. This creates contradictory definitions of the problem, and contradictory solutions to solve it.

The contradictory views exist because a "wicked problem" has such a high degree of complexity. Because it's so complex, no single perspective has all the information about it, and no single perspective can fully understand it, which means no single perspective is the "true" perspective, and no single solution can solve the problem.

However, many people do believe their perspective is the true perspective, or at least truer or more adequate than other perspectives. They also believe that some of the other perspectives, or in some cases all of the other perspectives, are false. This creates conflict over how to define and solve the problem, which hinders responses to it.

Because of its complexity, because no one perspective understands it completely, because

there's no consensus on either defining it or solving it, and because there really is no "solution" to it, the "wicked problem" persists through time. And because it persists, it continuously evolves and changes, especially as people respond to it. Every time people apply a "solution," the solution doesn't solve the problem, it merely changes it. Each attempt to solve the problem simply changes the problem's complexity and produces new problems.

This means people must continually reevaluate and redefine their perspective on both the problem and the solution. But many people don't do that. They get attached to their perspective and dig in to defend their solution, even as their solution becomes less relevant or more dangerous.

Some prefer to call a "wicked problem" a "mess" in order to further highlight the problem's complexity. A "mess" is a complex problem that's inextricably entangled in a set of other problems. As Russell Ackoff puts it, "every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems."

Some are calling climate change a "wicked problem." Some are calling it a "mess."

Think about it. There's no consensus on how to define climate change.

Is climate change a problem because it really exists and humans are causing it? Or is climate change a problem because it's a hoax concocted by a government that wants more control over people's lives, and by scientists who're willing to lie because they're greedy for grant money?

Even among those who accept that climate change really exists and that humans are causing it, there's no consensus on how to define it and how to solve it. Is climate change predominantly an energy problem, an economic problem, a political problem, a technological problem, a spiritual problem, a social justice problem, an environmental problem, or some other kind of problem? How you define the problem determines your solution.

I often say climate change is a spiritual problem, because that's one of the predominant frames through which I look at it. But how I define it as a spiritual problem, and the solutions I therefore advocate, differ significantly from the way some evangelical Christians define it as a spiritual problem, and the solutions they advocate. There's no consensus even among Christians who recognize it as a problem.

And no solution advocated from any of these perspectives will, in the end, solve climate change. That's because climate change is so complex. It's a "mess" in the way that Ackoff and others define "mess." Climate change is an energy problem, *and* an economic problem, *and* a political problem, *and* a technological problem, *and* a spiritual problem, *and* a social justice problem, *and* an environmental problem, *and* a host of other problems including, as we'll see more of in the future, a national security and military problem. All of these problems are an entangled "mess." Mess around in one of these domains and you affect other domains.

There really is no "solution" to this problem, to this mess. David Ross and I talk about this all the time. To cut CO2 we need to stop burning coal. But when you stop burning coal, you throw all the coal miners out of work and produce all the human suffering that entails, with its attendant economic, political, and social fallout.

This problem, this mess that we call climate change, isn't going to end any time soon. Not in our lifetime. Not in our children's lifetime. "Wicked problems" and "messes" don't get solved once and for all, they evolve. The human species is going to be struggling with this "wicked problem," this "mess," for generations to come.

OK, enough on climate change. Let's shift the focus for a moment. Bring it closer to home.

One of the things that struck me as I was studying the characteristics of the “wicked problem” and the “mess” was that they described something with which I was quite familiar. Something quite close to home. Something personal. My own life. I realized that I could apply the basic elements of the “wicked problem” and the “mess” to my own life.

Think about it.

How many of us have lives that are problem free?

How many of us have lives that are not kind of a mess?

How many of us have ever said, “when I finally get my act together...” but then realized, “I’m never going to get my act together. My life is never going to be problem free. Life is messy, relationships are messy, and I’m entangled in all sorts of things, many of which I don’t want to be entangled in, but from which I can’t disentangle myself...and this will be the case for as long as I live.”

I don’t know about you, but my life definitely has an element of the “wicked problem” to it. Within myself, different parts of me look at life in different ways, and they don’t all agree on how I should define and solve the problems, challenges, and issues that I face in my life. There’s no internal consensus. Part of me sees it this way. Part of me sees it that way. And still another part sees it another way.

And every time some part of me tries to apply a solution to some problem, challenge, or issue that I’m facing, it doesn’t solve anything. It simply changes the equation.

And this never ends. The problems, the challenges, the issues that I face in my life, and that I try to resolve, just evolve and change over time. But they never go away.

My life is a “mess.” A whole tangle of problems, challenges, and issues that are entangled with other people’s problems, challenges, and issues. Locally and globally. Including some of yours.

I’m not complaining. I’m just recognizing that this is what life entails. This is simply the nature of life as a highly complex and interdependent creature on this earth. It’s never problem free. It’s never not a “mess.”

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, what I hope and pray for is not salvation *from* the “wicked problems” and “mess” of this world, but rather, salvation *within* the “wicked problems” and “mess” of this world.

I don’t look for some kind of escape from the problems and the mess that define my life and this world, but rather, the saving grace to face the on-going never-ending problems, challenges, and issues of my life, and our life on this earth, with a Christ-like heart and mind. With compassion and wisdom.

I hope and pray that in the midst of this messy world, and with the problems, challenges, and issues that I personally face, I don’t succumb to bitterness, anger, hatred, or despair. And that I don’t seek escapist distractions, or practice an escapist spirituality, to evade my personal responsibility.

I hope and pray that even with my limited capacity to comprehend or solve anything, I will nevertheless bear at least some of the light and Spirit that Jesus Christ bore as he lived and ministered within this problem-filled and messy world, and that I will bring about at least a little liberation, healing, and reconciliation in this world, even if I never solve a single problem or clean up a single mess once and for all.

And I hope and pray that we will draw closer together in holy communion with one another through the Spirit of Christ, through the heart and mind of Christ, through the compassion and wisdom of Christ, so that we will support one another in this life. So that none

of us has to face our problems and our messes alone. So that we may guide one another, strengthen one another, ease one another's burdens, and help one another remain hopeful and joyful in the midst of this problem-filled messy world. And so we may celebrate our little victories together, even as we face our next round of challenges.

Life is not easy. Our lives will never be problem free. We'll always find ourselves in some mess. But the more we deepen our communion with one another through Christ, the closer we become to one another in a spirit of love, a spirit of friendship, the more we can support one another, and the more of a positive difference we can make in one another's lives, and this world in which we live.

So let us now prepare ourselves to open up and share with one another the joys and the concerns of our lives.

Let us prepare ourselves to pray with one another, to pray for one another, and to pray for this world that is our home.

And let us prepare ourselves to share Christ's bread and cup with one another, that we may deepen our holy communion with one another through the Spirit of the living Christ.