

“Love Your Neighbor—It’s Important”  
September 15, 2024

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18  
Matthew 22:34-40

This morning and over the next three Sundays, I want to consider with you the difficult work that is given to us in the words: “Love your neighbor.”

While I was not here last Sunday, I did choose the scripture lessons, including those words from Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength.”

You might have recalled those words when you listened to Jesus answer the question: “What is the greatest commandment?”

Without missing a beat Jesus responds: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This,” Jesus says, “is the greatest and first commandment.”

While that should have settled the matter, Jesus continues: “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

With this addition, Jesus is quoting from Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Scriptures, a book that Christians are so often ready to denigrate as filled with rules and regulations with little import for the life of faith today. And, of course, we do away with so much with such easy dismissals.

What we discover in Leviticus, if we will listen, is not “rules and regulations,” but *Torah*—the Way in which the people of God will live together in covenant with one another before God. The Congregational tradition puts a lot of stock in covenant. Our congregation, like all others in this tradition, has our own covenant, an affirmation of how *we* will live together with one another and before God.

So, we will benefit from giving some attention to Leviticus.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Those words come at the end of several examples in which people might live out the *Torah*, the Way.

Care for the poor and the alien;

Do not steal or deal falsely or lie to one another;

Do not withhold wages;

Do not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.

Love is a simple word that is difficult to define. But Leviticus tells us that love is made real in action. Leviticus is concerned with right relationships between people—which is what the Bible means when it talks about justice. Love.

Right relationships.

Cornell West famously said that justice is what love looks like in public. And this is the Way of love. And I want to come back to this greater Way in a few minutes.

God's Way, as Moses makes clear, is a Way of great inclusive love—it begins with one's own people and then extends far beyond any one nation or group of people. Moses encourages the Hebrew people to think about others, even the strangers in their midst, to connect imaginatively with their situation, and to *act* accordingly—that is, to show the love that grows from empathy.

If such love seems stunted in our time, perhaps the soil of empathy no longer provides for fertile growth.

Certainly, we've seen this stunted love, this barren empathy, in the vile lies and hatred shown towards immigrants—and especially toward Haitians in Springfield, OH—that have come from the Republican Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates in the past weeks. How different are their words from the Way that we heard this morning: "Do not go about spreading slander, care for the poor and the alien." How different are their words from those of the Psalmist who describes the living God as the One who deals justice to the oppressed, who feeds the hungry, and protects the stranger in the land.

It would be easy for me to stand up here and denounce those attacks—and, indeed, earlier this week I had a concept of a sermon in which I would do just that.

But you know those lies are just that—lies. And you know how those words have led to bomb threats. I don't need to tell you such things.

Let me give an example of the lack of empathy that might hit closer to home:

Nicholas Kristof recently wrote that: "Since 2016, the liberal impulse has been to demonize anyone at all sympathetic to Donald Trump as a racist and bigot." Anyone?

He quoted Michael Sandel, the Harvard philosopher, who says that the scorn for people with less education "is the last acceptable prejudice" in America. And probably in Iowa City.

To Kristof, this seems "morally offensive, particularly when well-educated and successful elites are scorning disadvantaged, working-class Americans who have been left behind economically and socially and in many cases are dying young. They deserve," he said, "empathy, not insults."

Empathy. Love your neighbor.

Jaron Lanier, a pioneer in virtual reality and advocate for humanism in our digital age wrote that book with the wonderfully provocative title: *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. In it he says that “Empathy—an ability to understand what other people are experiencing and why; imagining one being in another’s place—is the fuel that runs a decent society.” And this is a time when it seems that—liberal and conservative alike—we are running dangerously low on fuel.

Among other things, Lanier makes the case that “Social Media Is Undermining Truth, ... Making What You Say Meaningless, ... and Making You Unhappy”—which all make me wonder what we’re doing with a church Facebook page, but that’s another sermon.

And then there’s “Argument Six: Social Media Is Destroying Your Capacity for Empathy.” He writes about the “digitally imposed social numbness” that plagues us.

Here’s how it used to work. We noticed the reactions of people around us and used them to help get our own bearings. If everyone around you was nervous, you got nervous. When everyone was relaxed, you tended to relax. If people were looking up, you looked up.

But, Lanier asserts: “When everyone is on their phone, you have less of a feeling for what’s going on with them. Their experiences are curated by faraway algorithms.”

How do we fill up on the fuel that runs a decent society? How do we develop and exercise the virtue of empathy?

In this place, at least for a while, we put down our devices and look and listen in different ways. We seek to be people who can see the image of God in the faces around us. We hope to become people who can listen in ways that our world view might be altered, opening us up to new possibilities. This is why congregations matter and why what we do in this congregation is so vital to the wider life of our community and our nation in these days.

In this place, we might yet develop the empathy needed that we might love our neighbor as ourselves. We might find ways to listen to those whom we would rather ignore. We might find ways to turn and face the people from whom we would rather walk away. We might find ways to recognize that God is doing a new thing among and through people who are outsiders—outside the church, outside our small circles.

In this place, we might also discover the ways in which such love can be made real in the world.

E.J. Dionne once put it this way: “We do not need, and should not want, to end religion’s public role. We *do* need a more capacious understanding of what that role is. We need a more demanding standard whereby religious people live up to their obligations to religious pluralism and religious liberty by making public arguments that are accessible to those who do not share their assumptions or their deepest commitments. And we need

to understand that religion offers its greatest gift to public life *not* when it promotes certainty, but when it encourages reflection, self-criticism, and doubt.”

Of course, we Congregationalists are in a place from which we can offer that great gift to our nation—for we affirm a faith that is not certainty; a faith that brings questions and doubt into the public square.

The Congregational understanding of Christianity does not allow us to sit quietly and pray while the world hurts and rages around us. Our questioning faith is needed in such a world.

And this brings us back around to those words from Leviticus. This morning we heard once again of God’s concern with:

Providing for the poor and hungry that all might be fed;

Fair employment practices;

The rights of the disabled;

Impartial administration of justice:

That is to say, we heard of God’s concern with our public life—with love becoming justice.

The political process is the way that communities and nations organize their common life, allocate their resources, and deal with shared problems. Politics is about the values we honor, the money we allocate, the process we follow so that we can live together with some measure of justice, order, and peace.

For people of faith, concern with politics is never simply about the triumph of one party or another. It is one way that we try to plow God’s wholeness into the soil of our history. It is a way that we seek to live out the two great commandments—loving God as we love our neighbor.

And if we are serious about the love of God and the love of neighbor, the days ahead will stir our thoughts and our prayers and rouse us to action.

Human rights—respecting the image of God in every person—are religious and political issues.

Economics—and our right use of the financial resources we have—are religious and political issues.

Poverty—and caring for the poor and the vulnerable in a way that empowers—are religious and political issues.

The environment—and protecting the creation—are religious and political issues.

Truth telling, education, immigration—all religious and political issues.

Yes, people of goodwill can and will take different positions on how these issues are to be addressed. Indeed, because we are part of the United Church of Christ—and especially because we are members of *this* congregation, where each person's right to his or her own opinion is also a religious tenet—we will differ. I hope and pray that we will differ.

As we recognize the compassionate judgment of God on all our actions our light will break forth and healing shall come.

Love of neighbor keeps calling us into relationship with the rest of the world. We won't always like what we see and hear, but we are called to look and listen. We won't always get it right but our ancient tradition calls us still in this modern world to love our neighbors as ourselves.