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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10, 17-18 & Matthew 22:34-46

Offering Welcome, Healing, Justice and Peace

For the last few weeks we have been sitting with Jesus in the Temple as he engages in back and forth conversations with various religious and civic authorities. This has occurred across the two days after he entered Jerusalem on what we traditionally celebrate on Palm or Passion Sunday. This morning we hear the final conversation - Jesus answering a question posed to him by a religious leader, followed by Jesus asking a question of them. Hear now these words from Matthew 22:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" '?"

"If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

This has not been a banner week for the words the Lord spoke through Moses and that Jesus quoted to the religious authorities and the crowds. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." If I am honest, it has been an incredibly disheartening week - from the violence in Israel - bombings, kidnappings and torture; and in Gaza - bombings, deprivation of basic needs including medical care; to the mass shooting in Maine to the chaos in Washington where ego has triumphed over the needs of the people; to infighting in our local university community. It feels too easy to say that these words written so long ago have little impact in our world today. And because of that, I think it is more important than ever that we speak these words aloud and that we work to embrace them in our lives.

Our texts from Leviticus and Matthew this morning are two of the texts from the Revised Common Lectionary for this Sunday. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle

of texts that are used across many Protestant denominations. The Roman Catholic Church has a similar cycle of texts and today's lectionary readings feature our text from Matthew. This means across churches, not just in the US but around the world, Protestant and Catholics are hearing the admonition to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." And that my friends gives me profound hope. Hope that love will drown out hate speech and bigotry. Hope that love will overwhelm violence. Hope that love will repair landscapes devastated by bomb shells and missile strikes. Hope that love will redeem broken relationships between families and neighbors that breathe the same air and till the same sacred ground.

And yet the questions persist. How do we move from the fractured world we inhabit to the world of shalom - salam - to peace? I think it is instructive for us to spend a few minutes in the book of Leviticus, a book we don't often hear from on Sunday mornings. Leviticus is one of the books of the Old Testament that gets a bad rap because we too often don't understand the context. People who attempt to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation get to Leviticus and aren't sure what to make of it. Genesis has the great sweeping stories of creation and Noah, of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Exodus has Moses and the liberation from slavery, the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea and Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God. And then we get to Leviticus and there is a big letdown as the sweeping narratives become a bit like reading a manual on how to assemble a piece of Ikea furniture. The whole of chapter one is devoted to how to prepare a burnt offering. In fact the first seven chapters are devoted to instructions concerning ritual sacrifices. This is followed by instructions about priests, how to prepare the altar, how to keep yourself and sacred spaces pure and holy, how to atone for sins committed, and rules and regulations for festivals, offerings and special ceremonies. Twenty-seven chapters covering the situations the Hebrew people faced as they formed a community who worshiped the Lord God who freed them slavery in Egypt, who kept the covenant promised to Abraham and who would lead them into the Promised Land.

Dorinda shared a reading from Chapter 19 which is from the section of Leviticus covering what are known as the Holiness Codes – a collection of regulations concerning purity and ethical conduct. Why is ethical conduct included in the holiness codes? Because ethical conduct is considered moral holiness. Leviticus 19 opens with these words: "Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites and say to them: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." What follows is a summary of the ways we are to be holy. Much of Chapter 19 is restates the Ten Commandments although in a different order: revere your mother and father, keep the Sabbath holy; do not turn to idols or make cast images of idols; do not steal; do not deal falsely and do not lie to one another. Other verses prescribe practices to prevent disrespect or profane behavior against God. And still others extol ethical practices toward neighbors. For example in verses 9-10 Dorinda read about the practice of gleaning: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen

grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.” These ethical practices are summed up in verses 17-18: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

How do love your neighbor as yourself? Yes – it is not stealing from them or lying to them. But it is more – it is making sure that they have food to eat. It is not having hatred in your heart. It is not holding a grudge. It is, as the mission statement of PCO ends, “by offering welcome, healing, justice and peace to all in the name of Jesus Christ.” It is by seeing the face of Christ in each other. It is by mourning when our neighbors mourn and rejoicing when they rejoice. It is by choosing to be in community. It is by choosing love and not fear.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has written a powerful book titled *Together. The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. I know some of you have read this book. I invite those who haven’t to give it a read. It is available in our church library. Among the stories Dr. Murthy shares is a particularly poignant one about his one-year old daughter falling ill and his realization that, while he had friends and family scattered around the country, he and his wife lacked access to an immediate community “– a connected life that he deeply desired.”¹ And then he goes on to share how community emerged, family traveled, friends showed up to help with their other son; hospital staff rallied around them. He shares that the experience was “like taking my dark glasses off and seeing the brilliance of human connection in full force. There is much more love and connection in this world than I had allowed myself to see.”² This prompts him to write a letter to his children, which includes the quote that appears as the words of preparation in the bulletin this morning: “Right now, the world you are inheriting is locked in a struggle between love and fear. Fear manifests as anger, insecurity, and loneliness. Fear eats away at our society, leaving all of us less whole, so we teach you that every healthy relationship inspires love, not fear. Love shows up as kindness, generosity, and compassion. It is healing. It makes us more whole.”³

This is what the Lord is saying through Moses and what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees. Reject the fear. Reject the anger. Reject the insecurity. Embrace kindness. Embrace generosity. Embrace compassion. Offer welcome, healing, justice and peace to all. This morning we have some opportunities to participate in acts of that offer welcome, healing, justice and peace. Following our brief (it will be brief!) Congregational Meeting to elect church officers (an important act of serving Christ through the church), stay for a time of fellowship and have a conversation with someone you don’t know well. Make a new connection. And then stay for a bit longer to attend the our Volunteer Service Fair to share your time and

¹ Vivek H. Murthy. *Together. The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. Harper Collins, 2020. p275

² *ibid* p279

³ *ibid* p280; also available online at https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/17209759.Vivek_H_Murthy

talents so that the church community can be a place of welcome, healing, justice, and peace. During the Volunteer Fair there are two tables set-up where you can write notes of support and care to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. What does it mean to “love your neighbor as yourself?” It means you reach out and bear each other’s burdens, recognizing that we are stronger when we are connected. It means you stifle the urge to pontificate on the political situation while the wounds are tender and the despair and concern for safety are in sharp focus. This is how we become whole – whole as individuals and whole as a community.

I want to end this morning by sharing a poem that speaks to the fractured nature of our world and God’s desire for us to be made whole. It is titled “The Invention of Fractions” by Jessica Goodfellow. The poem opens with a quote from German mathematician Leopold Kronecker “God himself made the whole numbers: everything else is the work of man” and continues:

God created the whole numbers:
the first born, the seventh seal,
Ten Commandments etched in stone,
the Twelve Tribes of Israel —
Ten we've already lost —
forty days and forty nights,
Saul's ten thousand and David's ten thousand.
'Be of one heart and one mind' —
the whole numbers, the counting numbers.

It took humankind to need less than this;
to invent fractions, percentages, decimals.
Only humankind could need the concepts
of splintering and dividing,
of things lost or broken,
of settling for the part instead of the whole.

Only humankind could find the whole numbers,
infinite as they are, to be wanting;
though given a limitless supply,
we still had no way
to measure what we keep
in our many-chambered hearts.⁴

Join me in prayer.

⁴ Jessica Goodfellow. *A Pilgrim's Guide to Chaos in the Heartland*. Concrete Wolf Chapbook Series; 2006; p9. Available online at <https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2007%252F02%252F23.html>