

Sermon – 11/4/18
“Loving God, Neighbor, and Self”
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34
24th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,² so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Some 2,500 people gathered [last] Sunday at a memorial service for the 11 Jewish worshipers slain in their Pittsburgh synagogue during Sabbath prayers, a mass murder the mayor called the city’s “darkest hour” while exhorting mourners to **“defeat hate with love.”**

Several speakers addressing an overflow crowd at the University of Pittsburgh’s *Soldiers and Sailors Hall* sounded themes of *inclusion and unity*, in counterpoint to the rise of *toxic political discourse* widely seen as creating an atmosphere conducive to violence.

“What happened yesterday will not break us. It will not ruin us. We will continue to thrive and sing and worship and learn together and continue our historic legacy in the city with the friendliest people that I know,” Rabbi Jonathan Perlman told the interfaith audience.¹

In a similar way, at an outdoor Vigil on the night before, my Seminary classmate, Vince Kolb, who is the Pastor of Sixth Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh (in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood), said this to another large crowd:

“Just two weeks ago ..., the film crew for You Are My Friend completed filming, a movie about Fred Rogers, starring Tom Hanks, that will be released sometime next year. It is the story of a man who lived and worked and worshipped in

¹ Jessica Resnick-Ault, Chriss Swaney, “We Will Defeat Hate with Love: More than 2,500 Gather for Pittsburgh Memorial Service,” Huffington Post (Religion), October 28, 2018

our neighborhood, a man who continues to teach us all about **love, neighborliness, and peace**. When he teaches the children; his words and way still speak to us; they still teach us.

It is in that spirit of **neighborliness** that we gather here tonight, to be **allies** for our Jewish neighbors who have been victimized and traumatized by this tragedy. Because this happened just down the street, we have opened our doors. It is important for us to stand in **solidarity** with our Jewish friends, family, and neighbors ...

In spite of our religious, ethnic, political, and economic differences, despite the diversity of our genders and sexualities, our histories, and our experiences, **we are one human family**. We gather to affirm our **kinship** with all our fellow human beings, but particularly tonight with the millions and millions in the Jewish community who continue to be the target for hate crimes. We gather because we are heartbroken, but we also gather to affirm our resolve that we have zero tolerance for anti-Semitic speech, behavior, and violence. Zero tolerance. In the words of the psalmist, we want the mouths of liars to be stopped.

Finally we gather as a people who long for a new day and a new city when the tears of the suffering will be dried, when the reign of goodness is clear, where the creation is restored, and the leaves of the tree of life will be for the healing of all peoples.²

Let's reflect for a moment on the words and concepts that we heard in these two messages from Pittsburgh: *Love, Neighborliness. Peace. Allies. Solidarity. Kinship. One human family.*

You know, so many of the stories in the Bible are lessons about these very same things.

For example, God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh. Instead of facing his prejudice against the Assyrians, Jonah ran away. After a deep sea detour of some repute, he finally made it to the Assyrian capital. Much to his self-righteous chagrin, they embraced God's love and forgiveness with such fervor and humility that even the cattle were wearing sackcloth and ashes. Compared with earlier biblical sources that suggested that God was some sort of exclusive tribal deity, the book of Jonah stands in direct opposition. Instead of sounding the alarm to circle the wagon against "the other," the story of Jonah trumpets the conviction that God's grace is extended to all people, even the ones for whom we might hold human hatred and prejudice.

John Shelby Spong believes that the story of Jonah is about human prejudice. He says:

*"It's about a prophet who is called by God to speak to people for whom the prophet does not care. He refuses to speak and goes in the opposite direction. But God keeps pushing him back to Nineveh. To me, that story is designed to demonstrate that the love of God does not have boundaries. **Nations** have boundaries and **tribes** have boundaries and **prejudices** have boundaries and **fears** have boundaries. But the love of God has no boundary! And anytime you impose a human boundary on the love of God, you have done something evil, cruel, destructive, and ungodlike. If God can love even the Ninevites, there must be something bigger going on here. It goes beyond just tolerating people. It goes on to acceptance and affirmation of people—not despite their differences, but because of their differences."*³

Spong, who is 87, believes that such efforts are "at the very heart of the Christian Gospel," saying that the wars in his life have primarily been "against prejudice expressed toward black people, prejudice expressed towards women, prejudice expressed toward gay and lesbian people, prejudice expressed towards Jews and other religious groups."

He concluded by saying: "If the love of God is bounded by my tribe or my race or my gender or my sexual orientation or my religion, **then** the love of God becomes one more human idol."⁴

Which is a perfect segway to our Gospel reading from Mark this morning—where we discover the antidote to prejudice and fear.

You see, I prefer to think of the two-fold *great commandment* of Jesus as the *great relationship*. Here is a paraphrase: The first relationship is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the great and first relationship. And a second relationship is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two relationships depend all the Law and the Prophets.⁵

Let me unpack the meaning of this for you:

² <http://sixthchurch.org/a-statement-from-rev-dr-kolb-about-the-tragedy-at-tree-of-life/>

³ David M. Felten & Jeff Proctor-Murphy, "Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity," Harper One, New York, 2012, pp. 152, 153

⁴ Ibid., p. 153

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, Harper, San Francisco, 2001, p. 301

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible use the language of love to speak of God's relation to Israel. *God is the lover, Israel is the beloved.*

But loving God is not *exclusionary*. Rather, loving God includes the whole of creation, for it is all *in* God and matters to God.

Remember, at the first phrase of John 3:16, it affirms: "*For God so loved **the world.***" Not just "us," however large or small "us" may be: our particular group, or Christians in general, or good people, or even all human beings. Rather, God loves "the world."⁶

Think of it this way:

Lives deeply *centered in God* are marked by *freedom* and *courage*. William James made this point provocatively in his definition of "*saintliness*": *saints are remarkably free from inhibitions*. We typically do not think of saints this way. But then James explains: *the greatest inhibition is fear. Fear about our own security and the security of those whom we love, about what others think of us, about failure, about departure from convention, about illness and death. Fear puts us in bondage. Freedom from fear liberates us.*⁷

Reflect for a moment on the three best-known Christian martyrs (saints) of the twentieth century. Imagine the courage it took to be *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1906-1945), who, living within the Third Reich, became a part of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Or the courage it took to be *Martin Luther King Jr.* (1929-1968), who, despite many death threats, continued to confront American racism. Or the courage it took to be *Oscar Romero* (1917-1980), Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, who in the last years of his life became the voice of the oppressed peasant class against a powerful and violent domination system. Whatever fears these men had to overcome, they were remarkably *free* because they were deeply *centered* in God.⁸

Friends, the Christian life—as exemplified in the great commandment to love God, neighbor, and self—is about a *relationship* with God that transforms us into more *compassionate beings*. The God of love and justice is the God of relationship and transformation.

And taking the God of love and justice and the God of grace *seriously* has immediate implications for the Christian message. It becomes: God loves us already and has from the very beginning; it's about *seeing* what is *already* true—that God loves us already--and then beginning to *live in* this relationship--*now*. It is about becoming *conscious of* and *intentional about* a deepening relationship with God.⁹

The gospel makes an appeal to us to tear down the walls, to reach out to those who are strangers, those who are far off, those against whom we harbor prejudice—even our enemies. The gospel engenders a radical hospitality that requires boundaries be crossed, barriers be dismantled, and walls be torn down.¹⁰

That is the great hope of the world in these divided, fearful, and troubled times.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, "*Convictions*," Harper One, New York, 2014, p. 219

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228

⁹ Marcus J. Borg, "*The Heart of Christianity*," Harper, San Francisco, 2003, pp. 76, 77

¹⁰ "*Living the Questions*," p. 162