

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Sermon: The Politics of a Christian Nation Are to Love Your Neighbor

Pastor Adam Ericksen

Clackamas United Church of Christ

Sometimes people ask how a church can welcome all these people. After all, doesn't religion cause you to exclude people who "don't belong?" In our passage from Matthew 22 at worship today, Jesus says the most important commandment is to love. He makes no exceptions. Neither do we. God loves you. And so do we.

Friends, there is an ancient tradition within Christianity that goes back to the very early church and it was based on a question. That question was this – why did God become human in the person Jesus? This was one of the big questions of the early church and it's a big question that Christians have been asking ever since. We have this tradition within scripture that of the incarnation that somehow Jesus and God are one. They're of one will, of one desire. And what does that mean? Why did God do this? There have been many answers to this question, but one of the earliest answers may surprise you because oftentimes the answer that I have heard is that God became one in Jesus. God became human in order to take God's wrath upon God's self. In order that Jesus would have God's wrath for all of humanity directed against Jesus himself, against God himself. And if you have heard that story, I want to invite you to say that that story is garbage, that is not the reason that God became human. Why? Because the earliest church answered the question like this – God became human so that humans might become more like God. God became human that we might participate in the divine life together. And what is the divine life like?

The Letter of First John says this – God is love. In fact, there are only two truth statements about God in the New Testament and they're both found in First John. The first one is that God is love, and the second one is God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. What does this mean? It means that God is the flow of love in this world. The early church said that the reason that God became flesh was to get us caught up in the flow of God's love. So Jesus says this in our passage today when he is confronted by some opponents who try to trick him up and they ask him – what is the most important commandment? And Jesus actually gives two. He quotes Deuteronomy – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. And Jesus says the second is like it – Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

This is how we get caught up in the divine life. This is how we get caught up in the flow of the universe. If you don't like using God language then this is the flow of the universe. Love, it's what all of our religious traditions bring forward and, yes, there is violence in scripture. As Charlie said earlier, every culture, every religious tradition, including Christianity, including Judaism, and including Islam, has violence within our sacred scriptures. Has aspects of our sacred scriptures that tries to divide us against them. To say that no God is only for us, and thus God is against them. But within our scriptures as well is another strand, a strand that Jesus firmly puts himself in. A strand that says God is love and our job is to follow the commandments that lead us to love.

There's a Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinozza who quoted - is this paraphrasing - If your interpretation of the Bible doesn't lead you to love your neighbor better, then you're not interpreting the Bible correctly. Jesus gives us the lens through which to interpret the Bible and that is the lens of love. And I want to tell you that Jesus is not the first rabbi to say this. This is a debate that's been going on within Judaism from the very beginning. In fact, you have rabbis like Rabbi Hillel who will refer to Leviticus 19 that says – Love your neighbor as you love yourself. And he says that the golden rule leading up to love your neighbor as you love yourself is don't harm your neighbor, do no harm. In fact, one of them says you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people. Do you know what that means? You shall not seek revenge. You shall not seek vengeance against your people. If you're gonna do this spirituality thing right, if you're gonna get caught up in the life of God, don't seek vengeance. Don't seek revenge. What do you do instead? Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

After Jesus was another rabbi named Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said that the general law within the Hebrew scriptures that we need to live by is the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And as you continue, if you go back and you read Leviticus 19, you will see how it expands our view of who our neighbor is. Because Leviticus 19:34, I believe, says that if a stranger, if an alien, if an immigrant is within your midst, you shall love the stranger as you love yourself. What does this mean? Jesus picks this up when he's asked who is my neighbor. Jesus says everyone's your neighbor. The point is not to divide people up into us and them. The point is to love. That's how you get caught up in the life of God. What does that look like? That is the tricky question that we all have to grapple with, that we have been grappling with since the beginning of Christianity and from the beginning of Judaism.

God comes to Abraham at the very beginning and says that I have a mission for you, Abraham and Sarah. I have a mission for your children. God blesses Abraham and Sarah and all of their spiritual children. Not to keep that blessing for themselves, but to share that blessing with all the families of the earth. That's what it says in Genesis chapter 12. And that's what Jesus lives out. That's what this passage in Leviticus lives out. And Jesus, when he quotes scripture, he quotes one passage from Leviticus. He doesn't quote that other passage that gives us the willies. Why? Because it gave Jesus the willies, too. Jesus didn't quote those passages that lead us to be violent against any of our neighbors. Jesus didn't quote any of those passages that lead us to exclude our neighbors. Why? Because Jesus is on the mission to bless all the families of the earth, gay families, yes, immigrant families, yes, undocumented families, black families, and brown families, and poor families, and all the families of the earth, but especially those who are in need the most. That's how you get caught up in the life of God.

I want to conclude with this – there's this really weird passage after Jesus says that the two most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. It goes on and Jesus asks his opponents what do they think of the messiah, and if the messiah is the Son of David, and what that looks like. And why is this important? It's because, as Charlie alluded to earlier, politics matters. When first century Jews hear the term 'Son of David,' when they hear the term 'messiah' they hear it differently than many of us do. They hear politically loaded language. Jesus says that the heart of all of this, the way that you get caught up in the life of God is to love. And this has political implications. David is the greatest King in all of Israel. Every king after David is compared to David. This is political, so whenever Christians say that Christians shouldn't be political, just have them read the Bible. Just have them read the words of Jesus. This is politically loaded language.

What does it mean to be a political leader? It means to love your neighbor as you love yourself. It means to enact policies of love. So hear this, if you have a political leader who bases his policies, his actions, his statements, who he keeps around him, off of a principle of revenge, that is anti-Christian. If you have a political leader that attacks their opponents, threatening them with 'lock her up' or 'lock him up' that's revenge. There's no room for that in Christianity, but we all make mistakes. We all need to repent in certain areas of our lives. God knows I have needed to repent in certain areas of my life, but when Jesus refers to Leviticus, he's doing something that is massively explosive in our life together. Which includes our political lives together. No revenge, no vengeance. To be the Son of David, to worship the Son of David, to follow the Son of David. Jesus, the messiah, is to live a life that moves away from revenge into a life that loves our neighbors, including those neighbors that we might disagree with. Including those neighbors who give us the willies. To love them as we love ourselves and, yes, that means that sometimes we may need to go into the temple and throw the tables around. Yes, that means that we will need to make people uncomfortable as we seek a more just world.

Jesus did that and, yes, it means that as we work for a more just world, we do not seek vengeance, we do not seek revenge, we do not fight against flesh and blood, but as Paul wrote in Ephesians, 'we struggle against the powers and principalities of injustice in the world.' Can I get an Amen!

This is where we are moving. This is where we have to move. I hear all kinds of people, all kinds of Christians saying that we need to make this a Christian nation. You know what a Christian nation does? A Christian nation seeks to love all of our neighbors as we love ourselves. A Christian nation will seek to love our sick neighbors who are in need of health care as we love ourselves. You know what that means? Some form of universal healthcare. A Christian nation will seek to love our immigrant neighbors, including our undocumented immigrant neighbors as we love ourselves. A Christian nation will seek to love our LGBTQIA siblings as we love ourselves. And that means not making policies like they just made in Texas that allows social workers to discriminate against our LGBTQIA neighbors. A Christian nation doesn't do that. A Christian nation critiques war, doesn't go to war. A Christian nation seeks to get caught up into the life of God, not by having power against anyone. This is why I'm feeling icky about what I am saying right now is because for so long a Christian nation has been used to use our power over and against others. Christianity doesn't use power over and against others. Christianity is based on the power of love. To enter into the flow of God's love for all people, for all of our neighbors, including those that we may call our enemies. This is, for me, the most difficult thing to do especially as we are moving forward into the election. I struggle with this. I know that you are struggling with this, too. And maybe the most important thing that we need to hear right now is that God is love. That God loves you.

This is not all up to you. It is not not all up to me. This is up to us, for God is in the world. God is the flow of love. God is the flow of justice that is already working in the world. We heard it this morning with Charlie's words. We saw last week with Pope Francis. This is the movement of God in the world, the flow of God. May you get caught up in that flow of love. May you know deep in your bones that no matter what happens in the next couple of weeks, that we will have work to do. And as we do that work together, may we hold one another up in the spirit of love and justice and peace. Amen