October 26, 2014 Year A

All Saints’ Church Proper 25

Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Psalm 1 Matthew 22:34-36

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable onto you, dear Lord.

A few years ago, I had the good fortune of being involved on a study trip in Morocco.

I was on a bus from Casablanca to Fez, about a four-hour drive, and I was sitting next to a laborer. Much to my surprise, he spoke English beautifully. And before long, our conversation turned to faith. It was an amazing bus ride and for four hours I was his student, and he was my guide, like a mystic, so full of the life of the spirit.

He said, “In the end, faith is all about LOVE. But if we are not humble, we won’t be able to see with the eyes of faith. Love is everywhere, because God made it so. Will we be able to see?”

And then he recited a poem in Arabic- it was long and at the end I asked him to translate. He said it would be difficult, but he would try:

“Wheat that is heavy and full, bows down; it yields, surrenders to its fullness, its purpose; always silent, humble, heavy in expectation of what’s next, it is respectful, waiting.

“Wheat that is empty, stands proud, straight up, looks beautiful, strong, but it’s weak, puffed up with pride, haughty in its straightness. It has nothing.” [[1]](#footnote-1)\*

I haven’t thought about that poem for a long time, until I heard Jarvey Coffin read Psalm 1 at the home Eucharist we had this week with Jarvis and Bobbie.

Even though the wheat stands straight, it’s empty, “the wicked though they stand, will not be seen as upright when judgment comes, nor will they be among the council of the righteous.”

What a perfect lead in to the demanding Scribes and Pharisees. There is no humility with the religious leaders who come, yet again, to try to “zap” Jesus.

They already know the answer to the question they ask Jesus: “Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?”

There is no curiosity, no desire for a journey, no quest to see or to understand. They are not bent over or leaning in, full of God’s grace, to wonder with Jesus. They stand upright, and are empty when they ask their question: Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?”

Jesus gives a standard answer: The Shema, from Deuteronomy, that every Jew of his day knew by heart as the declaration of one’s faith: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

But then he adds a new idea, a line from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And then adds: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Your love has three goals: God, neighbor and self: as natural as breathing in and breathing out. What surprises the religious leaders is Jesus’ elevation of neighbor and self with God. How could Jesus mix the profane with the sacred?

But, of course, this is Jesus’ genius. God is so abstract for us and to love God in the abstract has the potential to lead us to a piety that is absent of any real belief. Let’s start with what is before us.

**Our Neighbor:** Who is our neighbor? The people of Jesus’ day knew. The neighbor was the widow, the orphan, the dispossessed, or the lost. Their scripture reiterates: We were once sojourners in a land, all aliens, and we were protected. We know the need to be protected and the power of protection. Because we were in need, and we were cared for, we will protect others. Everyone is our neighbor, loved by us.

I love the fact that the roots of our faith are buried in this truth: we are all sojourners in this life. We are even orphans, all of us, separated existentially, from the Source of our very Being. Frederick Buechner refers to this feeling, by summing up this existential angst: we are suffering from HOMESICKNESS.

**Our Selves:** We have left our home, and we will return, but not yet. Like a reed torn away from its riverbed, we make a mournful sound, a lament. Maybe that is why we are so drawn to the cry of the flute, as it reminds us of Home that we once knew as our Source, and because we all started from the same place, this “knowing” is traced in our DNA . We miss the Source of our Life. We are not home with our Sustainer. We are on a journey: this thing we call LIFE. And we are to love it and ourselves.

And so we know and need to protect both the neighbor and the self: Orphans, alone, sojourners, and fully alive.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities, homes and support networks for people who have intellectual disabilities and developmental struggles shared in a lecture at Harvard:

“People come to our communities because they want to serve the poor; they will only stay once they have discovered that they themselves are the poor. And then they discover something extraordinary: that Jesus came to bring the good news to the poor, not to those who serve the poor.”

We are all poor, all sojourners, all orphans dealing with this deep loneliness.

And yet this is not something to lament because this state allows us to long for God- to see with the eyes of faith.

God will hear our cry. “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

The images of God as mother are many- the compassionate God who will nurture each and every one of us. No wonder- the word for womb and compassion has the same root.

God as womb, God as a fierce and tender mother who watches out for the vulnerable, the helpless, the lonely. And out of our vulnerability, and especially in the knowledge of our vulnerability, we reach out to others and to ourselves.

It is here where we can Love God with our heart (will).

Love God with our soul (strength of will), and

Love God with our mind (understanding). God first, God last, God always.

Jesus is creating another kind of Trinity: Father, Neighbor, Self and the mystery of these three invite the presence of Love in our midst.

I remember a time when I was a young chaplain. I knew little about faith and felt that if I just prayed with people it would be ok. I did no harm, but I wasn’t very present. I wasn’t facing my fear, my confusion, my own loneliness when I was with patients. I wasn’t very present.

One day I came into a room with a young mother, not much older than I and her 18 month old child was in a crib with two large casts on her legs. The baby was crying, relentlessly, and the mother could do nothing but be by her side, as the baby could not be picked up. She was being stabilized for surgery the next day. I was overwhelmed by the mother’s love- she who could be present but could do nothing to console her daughter. It left me speechless.

I didn’t pray and didn’t say much, but that I would be there the next day during surgery.

I came the next day, sat down next to the woman and said nothing. I was with her for an hour but couldn’t make any kind of talk, and I didn’t feel like praying with her. I left chastising myself for being such a lousy chaplain.

The next day, when I arrived, I heard that the operation had been a success and that her daughter may very well learn to walk. And then the woman said a remarkable thing. “Thank you so much for your presence. You didn’t speak, and for that I was very thankful. I didn’t want to talk or pray, but I didn’t want to be alone either. In your wisdom, you must have known that. You knew exactly what I needed.”

What a lesson. Her love for her daughter overwhelmed me, and through her love, I could love her as well, by just being with her. She taught me that presence is key and if prayers did not come from being present, from bridging the gap, from holding each other in our loneliness and angst, then prayers became empty, puffed up, straight, yet holding nothing. My whole life as a chaplain changed.

Love is not blind. Love helps us to see, deep inside to our neighbors as well as to ourselves. Love gives us sight within….. insight, so that we can see the world with the eyes of faith, with grace, mercy and humility.

The World is ablazed with God’s love. Can we see it?

Amen

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton

1. \* The poet is Abou Tayeb Motanabi, considered one of the greatest poets in the Arabic language, yet rarely translated into English. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)