

Sermon – Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 22: 34-46

One of my go to preachers is a man named William Sloane Coffin, who was pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan from 1977 until 1987. He was a man of great faith and a man who lived by the dictum of theologian Karl Barth, who said “Take you bible and take your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from the bible.” In other words, as Christians we have to look at the world through the lens of scripture, through the lens of Jesus Christ.

A few years ago when I got sick of Facebook manipulating my news feed I decided that my main source of news was to be from the newspaper. Over the past four years there has been no end of interesting news articles to read and interpret, to try and get a handle on the political, social and environmental changes taking place in our country, and indeed the world. It has been intriguing for me to see the strong parallels in human behavior in contemporary society with similar behavior outlined in scripture.

Most of us don't read the bible as 'originalists' or 'textualists,' terms now at the forefront of our minds because of the confirmation of another Supreme Court Justice. In scriptural terms this might be called a literal reading of all the biblical texts, whereas many of us would read most of the texts, but now all, as allegorical. Many scholars believe the old testament is an allegory for the new testament, enriching the meaning of Jesus' teaching.

Most of us read the bible as the word of God that is alive and speaking to us in our modern lives. We reflect on Jesus' parables, contemplate the poetry of the psalms, read the ancient Hebrew scriptures with an understanding of a peoples trying to interpret the world around them and we also have to understand the allegories, metaphors and analogies that are woven through the texts in letters, prose and poetry.

So how might God be speaking to us in our present age? As I contemplate scripture and current events the first message I see is that God uses God's creation to teach us about the weaknesses of the world. In the case of our country I feel we are been made aware of the frailty of humanity, the environment and the social fabric of society.

Second, over the past few years we can see that democracy as our system of government itself is fragile and freedom through democracy is not a given. The democratic system is based on the good will of our leaders and if there is no goodwill then the system risks collapse. Thirdly, a nation's leadership that sows fear and doubt into society by stirring up prejudice, hatred and conflict puts their own interests above the best interests of people, leading to a further erosion of equality and justice.

Division in society is death for countries as well as families and businesses, and we can see that those people who feed on division and fear do so for their own benefit. Whereas, the majority of society would prefer its leadership to help create a society that enables them and their

children to flourish, not just take care of a few powerful people. I heard a commentator say that the constitution of the United States relies on an unwritten premise that those acting under it would do so with goodwill. But we have seen what happens when our leaders do not act from the same premise. People and society lose their way.

What then does Jesus teach us about living in society today? The gospel reading for today is a great starting point.

When God freed the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt and set them on a course to freedom under the leadership of Moses, God saw that the people needed guidance. We know from scripture that after a time they began to grumble and looked back fondly on their enslavement and all its certainty and security. Now that they were free, they lost that security, even though it was detrimental to their wellbeing.

So God halted their journey, took Moses aside and set him up with ten commandments, twice. God saw that the community needed a framework for life and the commandments that Moses received established a framework for loving God and then loving others. The first four commandments establish how we are to live in relation to God. The final six set out how we are to live in community, with our loved ones and neighbors.

After God provided Moses with the commandments he took him aside again and told him explicitly that he had provided for him the commandments, the statutes and ordinances that the community would need as it moved into the promised land, the destiny of their pilgrimage. It was God's desire that they flourish once they arrived, to multiply and live well off the fertile land. He wanted them to live lives "fearing the Lord, not deviating to the right or to the left."

Moses was then given what is today referred to in Judaism as the Shema. It appears in Deuteronomy 6:5, and is a foundation of Jewish worship. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The Shema is one of two prayers mandated in the Torah. It is the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism and it is recited by the faithful every day and night and has been since Moses was gifted with it. It is fundamental because it confirms the basis of monotheistic faith – that there is one God.

The Pharisees, who were trying to trick Jesus into stating a false belief would have clearly known that this passage was indeed the greatest commandment. Despite their piety they were trying to trap Jesus so that they could have him arrested and then they could be free of another troublesome man.

In Jesus answer to the Pharisees he expanded on the Shema stating that loving God also required loving one's neighbor. He drew upon another Torah verse from Leviticus 19:18 – "You

shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

So to love God, then and in today’s society, is to love the way God loves – that is indiscriminately. To love God is to love what God loves – everything. God is the source of all being and God loves all creatures because God called what had been created ‘good.’

To love like God, is not to say that we have to be mute, meek and mild. Jesus routinely critiqued those that lived in the society with him, however he always did it with a heart of love, a heart of hope that they would change their ways.

Loving our neighbors can be extremely challenging but not impossible. It is mighty hard to love someone who is trying to use their power and privilege to distort the political system to disenfranchise you. It is hard to love a leader so bent on personal survival in power as to undermine the very democratic foundations of our republic.

It is also hard to love an anarchist or a white supremacist. It is hard to love those that manipulate media or the hypocrite who stands only for power and not for equality. It is hard to love many of God’s people, but love we must for love conquers all evil.

Love is not experienced in isolation from God. God is love. We learn love from God, and especially from his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrated love by forgiving those that took his life away, he expressed love toward his closest friends and family and he showed love by washing the feet of his disciples and providing for them a meaningful memorial to his death, in the sharing of his body and blood. And God sent the Holy Spirit as an act of love for all of us, that we would not be left alone in the world, but accompanied every day by the spirit of God living in our hearts.

God has shown us the ideal for loving God and loving our neighbors. The work now is for us to love both. There will always be people in our communities who put power and their privilege above the love of God and their neighbors. There will always be an imbalance in life and in acceptance of various peoples in community and the rejection of others but as followers of Jesus we have a role to play to break down the barriers that divide us, and stamp out the injustice that thrives in division.

My deepest prayer for this election is that those who put politics over faith, see more clearly that they need to put faith over politics. May people be clear about electing public officials who will see their role in government as also breaking down the barriers of inequality and injustice by healing the wounds of division and helping to build a nation that allows all people to flourish. May they all come to love God and love all neighbors just as Jesus loved us – unconditionally.

May it be so through the love of Jesus Christ.

Amen