

**OUTRAGEOUS LOVE; LEVITICUS 19:1-2,9-18, 1CORINTHIANS 3:10-11,
MATTHEW 5:38-48; 2.19.17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

Did you notice the turn in the reading from Matthew? We are still in the Sermon on the Mount; three Sundays ago, when we started, Jesus was generously distributing God's blessings to the downtrodden and outcast. Generations have found comfort in his promise that those who have been cast down will be blessed and lifted up.

But now Jesus turns the tables. He is speaking to the same people, to those same downtrodden and outcast, everyday folks. But he moves from blessings and beatitudes to commands and demands. Jesus shifts from saying what God has done, is doing and will do for you and me to talking about what *we* are expected to do for God.

Just what are these commands and demands? Turn your cheek to the one who slaps you, walk the extra mile for the one who imposes upon you. Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. In other words resist evil not with evil but with good.

Which sounds a lot like that opening sentence from Leviticus today when Moses says to the people of God – “You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” And then Moses defines holiness with a long list of kind and charitable acts that touch every area of life from farming to the court system; in other words our relationship to God is worked out through our relationships with one another.

Moses repeats the great commandments and illustrates them with details like: paying a living wage, leaving some of the harvest for the poor to glean, treating the disabled with courtesy and respect, not abusing legal rights, treating all people the same, standing up for your neighbor, reminding your fellow Israelite of the law so that you are not responsible for their misdeeds, and not holding grudges. In other words, love your neighbor.

Paul too picks up this theme of living a moral/ethical life and says in today's epistle – we are building on the foundation God has provided. For Moses that foundation was the Law or Torah; for Paul that foundation is the embodiment of the Law in the person of Jesus Christ.

Like Jesus in his great sermon and Moses preaching to the people, Paul sends a wake up call to the members of the Corinthian church. Pay attention to the way you are building on top of God's foundation.

No one, no matter how esteemed – from apostles, saints and martyrs of old to the prophets and saints of our time, no one can lay a new foundation.

God has already given us the principles we need to live a good life; our purpose is to reveal to the world in our own living what God's principles look like. Here's the key to each of today's readings – add to this strong foundation, this treasure of wisdom, this secret to the abundance of life by being holy as God is holy, by assimilating these principles for living into your daily conduct and relationships; *not half way but all the way*; not only by treating your neighbor as yourself but by loving even your enemy and praying for those who persecute you.

You may be thinking, “I was with you until that last part about loving my enemy.” Outrageous isn’t it! What does God expect? Isn’t this taking it a bit too far? Science might agree with our skepticism: brain research of the last twenty years has unlocked the secret of our hardwiring. Researchers say that our limbic system is aroused by a set of “hot buttons” that trigger a visceral, intense “danger response.”

After millions of years of evolution and social conditioning, our brains tell us to ease in toward potentially rewarding others (like our friends) and to run away from perceived dangerous others (like our enemies). The adrenaline pumped into our nervous systems to protect us from a perceived enemy makes our responses to external threats kneejerk and defensive. Anxiety forces us into emergency mode, focused only ourselves and our survival.

Of course this made sense, from an evolutionary perspective, when our very survival could be threatened, suddenly, unexpectedly almost anywhere. When we heard a rustle in the bushes our limbic system enabled us to shift quickly into high gear.

This flight/fight response seems fairly descriptive of the dynamics now shaping the political landscape. Both sides treat ‘the other’ whether across the political aisle or the person who voted differently across the street or the immigrant from a Muslim nation or a person of color from the other side of town – like a threat or enemy.

Ironically, despite our advanced civilization we live and interact in virtual tribes, dwelling with self-selected, like-minded folks whether in our zip code or online communities. We lump and label ‘the other’ as enemy often without ever having met or interacted with such a person.

Last week at the Auburn board meeting Abbey Disney, granddaughter of Walt, philanthropist and documentary film maker who produced the prize winning “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” about Muslim and Christian women who joined forces to respond non-violently to the carnage of Civil War in Liberia, Abbey Disney admitted had Trump not been elected she and other like minded folks would be dancing on the graves of the opposition not looking back. Hard-wired for survival.

Enter today’s Scripture lessons. It is safe to say that our hard-wired coping mechanisms are the source of some of our most damaging mistakes of judgment about others. In a world of hair-trigger nuclear weapons that’s not a good thing.

Thousands of years of huddling in our tribes equipped us to regard strangers as foes until proven otherwise. In today’s interconnected, interdependent world, friend or foe fear can certainly be used to manipulate voters but it can also be a great burden and liability.

So if neurological research shows that our visceral, bodily reactions to fear of others are biologically, physiologically rooted why fight tendencies ingrained in us by millions of years of development? Because the record of God’s people proclaims another way: we are not left to our biological impulses and genetic code. God has opened up a new reality; some scientists even credit this alternate reality – call it the morality of love – to evolution itself, but that’s another sermon.

I wish you could have heard the conversation around the table at Auburn. Questions like how could we have been tone deaf to forty million people; blind to hard-scrabble lives that cobble together two or three part time jobs with no benefits or future?

Someone noted that being out of touch with millions of others – who, for the most part, did not share his liberal/progressive values – reveals aloofness and insensitivity at best and arrogance and presumption at worst.

There was talk about ‘unlearning’ what we’ve learned in our fast paced, competitive, get ahead culture; relearning things like humility, vulnerability, how to make amends v responding in flight/fight fear.

Around the room, board members were saying they themselves and their friends and colleagues are asking how to hold conversations with those who helped elect the new administration.

Many of you have shared similar concerns with me. Heath Rada, a new Auburn board member and immediate past Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA said he and his wife have simply not gathered, even socially, with their conservative friends in North Carolina.

We are in a rare moment. We realize we have to relearn how to talk with those with whom we disagree. So Auburn is launching a program called “Courageous Conversations” including training 100 people to host dinners in their homes for such brave exchanges.

There are other signs of moving forward to embrace the values of community and inclusivity; to be holy as God is holy, to fight evil with good and not with evil. One month ago, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” a group of ecumenical leaders issued, “A Letter to White Christians.”

The letter was written because the white Christian vote (8 in 10 evangelicals, plus a majority of Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants) was crucial to the election of Mr. Trump who continues to disparage people of color and anyone who disagree with him, including the press. The Letter questions Christian support for a leader who disregards the dignity of so many people.

It recognizes that the majority white Christian vote for Mr. Trump sent an unintended message: that white Christians are willing to support someone who perpetuates white supremacy; someone who believes that men have the right to insult and abuse women; who bullies and insults his critics; and who glorifies wealth and success.

The result is that Christianity appears to those not privileged, nor white, nor Christian to be insincere and self-centered rather than the just and generous way of Jesus.

But the bible and our faith uphold concern for the least of these, for diversity in the body of Christ, and for unity among God’s people whatever our race, gender or background.

The Letter to White Christians calls us to examine our conscience and follow a road that does not build up dividing walls of hostility but destroys them; to turn away from division, fear, and hate and toward those we have neglected with the dignity for every human being.

The letter concludes with this appeal to all white Christians whether we voted for Mr. Trump or not: “Do we see how complacent we have been about working for racial justice in our communities? Have we faced the degree to which we benefit from political and social systems that are rigged for people like us and against everyone else? Have we done the inner work to face and turn away from our own deep prejudices based on race, gender, religion and national origin? Have we acknowledged our arrogance and apathy, thinking that since we voted ‘the right way’ we have no further responsibility to join Jesus in solidarity with those who are poor, marginalized, feared, and hated?”

Here’s what fighting evil with good might look like; what being holy as God is holy might translate into: learning the difference between personal racist attitudes and systemic, institutional racism. Breaking out of our homogenous bubbles – research says white people have social networks made up of over 90% whites. Not putting the burden on non-whites to educate us, but do our homework with resources readily available to learn what it’s like to be a non-white *or a poor white person* in our culture. Not tolerating racial labels, stereotypes and slurs. And finally preparing ourselves for action, for public witness, to write letters, march in rallies, and put our own skin in the game.

Today’s neighbor-oriented lessons calls us to such action; but I also realize on this President’s Day weekend that being able to ask you to consider such action is a gift in this 240 year old American experiment. There are many nations perhaps, most nations, where such appeals would be considered disloyal to the regime if not illegal.

The stakes are high. More than a few articles and essays in the past month have raised concern about global economic crisis, nuclear war and climate disaster.

These alarms are not hyperbole. They are legitimate concerns. But today’s lessons affirm that we do not need to succumb to fear, rather we can respond with holiness and love. Radical, outrageous love.

Valerie Kaur, a 30 something millennial leader, mother, writer, poet, filmmaker and proud member of the Sikh faith tradition founded a national movement called The Revolutionary Love Project. On New Year’s Day she preached a sermon in which she referred to the darkness of the tomb as one way to think about the times in which we live. But, she said, she preferred to think of this time as the darkness of the womb – a moment in history when we are called to give birth to something new, a world where our children, where Bryson and his friends here at Westminster, and children across the land can grow up to fullness of strength and stature not in fear of the other but in communities that celebrate difference and practice love of neighbor.

Valerie said midwives tell mothers engaging in the hard work of giving birth to breathe and then to push.

That’s good advice for us as we face the hard work, in a nation undergoing birthing pangs, of a just and true society. Breathe, push, breathe, push; let us give birth to a world free of fear where our children can thrive. +