

SERMON ON THE MOUNT: DEEP STORIES; DEUT. 30:15-20, 1 COR. 3:1-9, MATT. 5:21-37; 2-12-17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

All three lessons today summon us to the higher ground of restored relationships.

Restored relationships in the nation: Moses, in the lesson from Deuteronomy, stands at the Jordan River, just before the people of God surge into the Promised Land.

It is an ominous moment because when they take over the land of the Canaanites they will discover not the scarcity of the wilderness but prosperity and abundance that will challenge their ethics and offer alternative sources of power and independence.

Moses is concerned that this new land may talk Israel out of its faith.

He alerts the people to this danger by calling upon them to choose the path of life by observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances. If they reject the life and faith they learned in the wilderness, he says, they will be on the road to adversity and death. Therefore, in this nation-defining moment, Moses urges, "Choose life!"

Paul calls for *restored relationships in the church*. He observes fighting among groups each claiming to be better than the rest because of the teachers they had. Yet, rather than elevating them, Paul says their division is a sign of spiritual immaturity.

No matter who their teacher or how wise, ultimately they serve a God who will use their gifts and efforts to bring about the new world God envisions.

Paul appeals to them by comparing their diversity to the parts of a human body and how only through their interdependence and need for one another, like a body, can they be the church God needs them to be; then in chapter 13, he invites them to give up their childish ways and choose the way of love; to become spiritually whole adults; to experience their best and fullest humanity.

In Matthew, Jesus summons his followers to *restored relationships in daily life*. He interprets the commandments to not murder, steal, lie or commit adultery as not only civil law but moral/ethical standards that are the foundation for a just society.

He calls upon his disciples to re-order their relationships not according to the letter of the law that measures external conduct, but according to the intention of the law that speaks to internal motives so that spouses, neighbors, citizens and the poor, all of whom the law accounts for and protects, can flourish in relationships aligned with justice.

When we aim for the best for each other rather than merely trying to avoid doing the worst to each other relationships are restored.

Moses guides Israel at the beginning of a new epoch in its life as a nation; Paul offers a course correction to the church in Corinth and Jesus' disciples receive a spiritual manifesto that will bring into being the new community, the Kingdom of God.

Moses, Paul and Jesus rest their case on how we treat each other and call for right relationships in the church, society and nation.

This is the precise biblical definition of 'shalom.'

Maybe you're thinking this is all obvious. But we are living in times when it appears we have forgotten the importance of healthy human relationships for the wellbeing of community from two persons in marriage to the vast enterprise of a nation.

The *New Yorker* this past week in an article about the new administration notes that "civilization is immeasurably fragile, and easily turned to brutality and barbarism. The human capacity for hatred is terrifying in its volatility." The identification Friday of Islam and Muslims as the sole source of terrorism, omitting white supremacist and right wing groups is a case in point.

This past three weeks saw more local demonstrations and protests against the new administration in Washington than any similar period in recent memory. Here at Westminster we held a meeting for a cross section of community leaders to gain a wider perspective on how this abrupt change of course is affecting us in Western New York.

One person, after a career practicing law gained what he called reverence for the place of the judiciary in our democracy, and said, like the new Supreme Court nominee, how disheartening it is to hear the president dismiss courts and judges.

Another person said he thought after two terms of a black president that we would find ourselves in a 'post-racist, post-antigay world' but in fact, he said, there is no such post anything world; we are back at the beginning and need to do what we've been attempting to do since the Civil War to end racism and discrimination but do it better.

One of the Muslims at the table said, 'If you all are feeling anxious, imagine how we Muslims feel,'; an African American who works to improve public education said his community on the East Side is close to the breaking point. A black woman, referring to appointments so out of sync with progressive values as well as the bullying and intimidation that ignites hate crimes across the nation, said, 'now you know what we know and feel what we feel.' An executive director of an immigrant resettlement agency talked about families unable to look forward to being reunited with loved ones and who are in crisis.

But there was also a sense of gratitude around the table for the chance to listen and learn from one another. The man who works for stronger schools thanked the group and said others' comments will help reshape and refocus his perspective; several noted the value of simply hearing where others are struggling, what their concerns and fears are – as well as their hopes to repair the nation.

After the meeting, one of the participants said to me an important voice was missing: the voice of those who support the new administration.

I had to agree and admitted that despite the wide diversity in the room, one thing we all had in common was a negative view of the new White House. Yet, whereas in the past I would have said that's just fine, we'll never see eye to eye or find common ground, it is increasingly clear to me that unless we can meet with those who hold social/political and economic views opposed to our own we will not repair the breach that has severed the nation.

What would it look like embark on the higher road to restore relationships and heal the great divide in our nation? When we were in Israel recently we met with a Palestinian Christian by the name of Sami Awad. The meeting was in Bethlehem one of the Palestinian territories you enter through a check point at the security wall.

Mr. Awad, is the founder of the Holy Land Trust. He told us how his organization is bringing together Jewish settlers and West Bank Muslims.

He said their goal is to pursue mutual understanding; to know what it's like to walk in one another's shoes not through political or theological discussions but to build real relationships; to get to know one another at deeper, personal level in order to build capacity to address the political barriers. We are not ready to design a two state map Sami said but something important is happening here; people are listening to one another, treating each other with respect. Restoration!

That night we had dinner with residents of Bethlehem in their homes. My small group included our tour guide Yael Friedman – a conservative Jew, mother of three and an Israeli Defense Force combat veteran. She said she had never been in the home of a Palestinian in the territories – in part because our tour with Christians and Jews exploring the geo-politics of Israel was the first such tour she led.

Our Palestinian hosts warmly welcomed us and before long we were talking about things like parenting, budgeting, doing home repairs, favorite vacation spots, and our hopes and dreams for our children.

By the end of the meal Yael and our host had exchanged email addresses. Yael offered to purchase anything they needed and give it to our host's husband who worked at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Because he is from one of the territories he is not permitted to go anywhere else but his place of work without special permission. So Yael offered to buy household goods for example, things not available in Bethlehem. She said she would shop for whatever they could not find in Bethlehem and bring it to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Two humans who literally live on opposite sides of the wall, reaching out to one another – restored relationship!

But maybe you're saying, well that's Israel. Things are different here. The political chasms here are uniquely unredeemable. But let me tell you about a member of our congregation who shared with me that in her place of work most of the employees voted for Mr. Trump. She said they hold very different views from her own. Then recently she decided to stop eating lunch in her office and take her lunch in the staff break-room to get to know them.

It's been eye opening. She hears people talk about the ebb and flow of life; she's discovering they share much in common. Like church. This past week she happened to have last Sunday's worship bulletin at the lunch table. When she opened it her colleagues were impressed A) that she was a regular church-goer and B) that the bulletin includes the full Scripture lessons.

Another foray into what was, before taking lunch with her fellow workers, if not enemy territory, then at least not very welcoming territory.

I've been reading Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right, A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide*. Hochschild writes about getting over what she calls the "empathy wall" by seeking to learn and understand our deep stories. Deep stories are about how we experience and feel about the world. Over five years, Hochschild spent time with a people in their homes, places of work, VFW halls, barbecues, high school musicals and local diners to find out who they are, what it feels like to live in their shoes.

Because she is a professional sociologist she does a lot of supporting research on the region of SW Louisiana, the petro-chemical companies located there, the ecological disasters that have altered life in what they call 'cancer alley' and the state regulations or lack thereof and what role Baton Rouge has played in the hard scrabble life in Lake Charles, LA.

By the end of the book you feel like you understand how these people think and feel about religion and politics and everything in between.

It's ordination/installation Sunday. Maybe this is a good day to charge our new officers and leaders to help us get to know one another better – starting right here in this congregation; then branching out to our places of work, our neighborhoods.

America is not only a nation but also an idea. Pluralism is the centerpiece of that idea. James Madison wrote in the Federalist papers that having many kinds of faiths, and many kinds of people establishes what he called a "multiplicity of interests" to go along with a "multiplicity of religious sects." The core logic of this hallmark principle is that it counters the law of the playground – together many can unite against a bully or a monarch.

There is also an alternative view of America – that it is not an idea but an ethnicity; that of the white Christian men who have dominated it, granting a grudging probationary acceptance to women, or blacks, or immigrants. From Huck Finn's pap as he drank himself to death to General Pickett as he led the charge against Gettysburg to Senator Joe McCarthy it is a view of the world that sees the other as a threat.

Restoring everyday relationships, especially with those whose deep stories are different from our own and give them a view of the world that may seem alien to us is not an exercise in niceness.

Reknitting the bonds of neighbors and neighborhoods, linking the suburbs to the urban centers, connecting rural life with city culture may be the most important thing we can do to heal our divided land. Neither side of the aisle in Washington appears to be leading the way. It's going to be up to you and me.

Someone told me the other day he has people who live on his street in one of the south town communities who are "afraid" to come into the city. Democracy is more fragile than we imagined. It's time to peel back the layers and discover the diverse, fascinating stories beneath the labels that divide us. It's what the bible calls us to do. We dare not delay. Amen.