

10/24/17

Ashley Mather

Sunday, October 29, 2017

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Prayer: Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today, now and always. Amen.

Our world is a pretty broken and somewhat scary place: Niger ambush, Las Vegas, more mass shootings than we can count, violence, and poverty, are just a few words that come to mind when I think about the world we live in.

I didn't fully realize just how broken our world was until I went on a mission trip six years ago with my home diocese called Kansas to Kenya (or K2K). I expected there to be poverty, but what I saw was beyond my comprehension. The individuals we were helping were living in makeshift tents in what's called an IDP camp which stands for internally displaced people. The reason they were displaced is because ten years ago there was a tribal war between the Kikuyu and Luo tribes in Eldoret. The government pitted the different tribes against each other in order to get a vote during the elections. Hundreds of people were killed, and most people lost their homes. A lot of the women and children fled to Maai Mahiu where Habitat for Humanity created this IDP camp for them. They often times didn't have enough food to feed their families or enough clothing to keep them warm during the frigid nights. And what I saw broke my heart.

But do you know what I saw that I didn't expect? I saw so much love and joy! These displaced people were so happy to be alive, to be with each other, and to have God in their hearts.

While we were there we would play with the children outside of the Anglican Church. Many of them were orphaned, and most of them didn't speak any English. They didn't care though, because they just wanted to play.

We also built houses for three families. When I say a house, I don't mean the types of houses we live in. They were about as big as from the front pew to the front of the pulpit, and it was only one story. About five people lived in these houses with three tiny rooms, but they were so happy to have a roof over their heads.

On our last Sunday there, we went to the Anglican Church that was right across the AIDS highway from the IDP camp. Most of the service was spoken in the tribal language of Kikuyu, so I wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but I remember watching the three families who we built the houses for. They were praising the lord like they lived in million dollar mansions and didn't have a care in the world.

During that service I felt like I fully understood for just a second what the light of Christ truly meant and what it meant to love God and my neighbor. It's a light that cannot be blown out, it's a passion that cannot be suppressed, and it's a love that cannot be taken away.

My experiences in Kenya taught me that just because we live in a broken world doesn't mean there can't be love and joy, but it is a choice that we have to make. Karoline Lewis says it perfectly, that "Joy is not abstract happiness. Joy is elusive. True joy is hard to come by and seems simply impossible when one starts down the road of real life."¹ I believe that this can be applied to love too.

The Old Testament and Gospel readings for today focus on love of God and neighbor. Leviticus reminds us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and in the gospel Jesus is questioned by a Pharisee lawyer about the greatest law. Jesus responds with "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."²

This Gospel lesson is the last section within a larger story of the Pharisees and Sadducees trying to entrap Jesus into saying something blasphemous. In the first section, Jesus shuts down the Pharisees when they ask him about paying taxes to Caesar. The same thing happens to the Sadducees in the second section when they ask Jesus a question about the resurrection. In this final section it appears that the Pharisees and Sadducees teamed up in a last attempt to trick and trap Jesus. It should be known that the Pharisees and Sadducees didn't necessarily like each other, so it goes to show how determined they were.

Jesus did not fall for their traps, and in turn gave them, and now us, answers that we continue to ponder and live up to in our daily lives.

Preaching on this gospel and about love in particular is a great joy, but it's important to not simply focus on the second commandment of loving our neighbors. It's easy to jump to that commandment to talk about how we should treat one another, do work for social justice, and talk about being made in the image of God. Allen Hilton says that "although he says the second is 'like' the first, Jesus does not collapse the two, as if love of God *equals* love of neighbor. We probably should not collapse them either."³

It's easy to simply make the jump to love of neighbor because our neighbors are the people who are right in front of us. They are people, like you and me. God is not a tangible being. God is mysterious and can be described in thousands of ways depending on who you ask. But the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind.

Our love for God has to come first in order to then love our neighbor as ourselves.

¹ Lewis, Karoline. "Choose Joy."

² "Sunday closest to October 26; Proper 25, Year A." Lectionary Page.

³ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*.

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In the short time that I have been here at Grace with you all, I have witnessed an incredible amount of love, both in the church and out in the community (through the Brown Bag Lunch program and last night's Trunk or Treat). It has been an inspiring place to be, and I'm very much looking forward to the rest of my time with you all.

I have witnessed the way you all love God, and I want to encourage all of us to continue to put our love of God first. This is not to say stop doing the things we do to love our neighbors when our love of God has possibly gone by the wayside. But lets make sure our love of God is a priority. We do this by coming to church, praying, and recognizing how truly lucky we are to live in a place that allows us to worship God.

I know that it can be difficult to feel our love of God wander sometimes. But remember that love and joy is a choice. We have to choose to love God. We have to choose to be joyful.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, just as my Kikuyu friends in Kenya chose to love and praise God during the rough times and chose to be joyful through all the pain. Let us also make those same choices. Let us focus on our love of God, and loving our neighbor as ourselves will naturally come too.

AMEN.

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