

Loving Those Whom God Loves  
Deuteronomy 10:17-22  
March 10, 2019  
First Sunday in Lent  
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I was sorry to miss our Ash Wednesday service last week – our household has been fumbling our way through a bad outbreak of the flu, with three of the four of us ill. I hated to miss the service but was quite sure you all didn't want my germs. I was grateful to Konni for stepping up and conducting the service in my stead.

Ash Wednesday is important because it begins this holy season of Lent – a time of reflection, penitence, and intentional communion with God. Here at St. Matthew we sometimes choose a theme for Lent, or a practice to do together. One year we read all the Psalms, another year we read through the Gospel of John. For Lent 2019 we are trying something different. The Lent Bible Study (and it's not too late to participate) is studying the topic of "Faithful Citizenship." And, as one aspect of faithful citizenship, we are called to examine the concepts of hospitality and welcome, especially as they relate to the "other." Obviously, this is a hot topic in our culture right now. There is a lot of misinformation in the population at large about immigrants, about who is and is not a "real" American. Those who are heavily invested in "national security" do their best to convince the rest of us that we need to be afraid of people who look differently from us, behave differently, or worship differently. It's tempting to turn our homes and churches into fortresses, fencing out anyone whom we do not understand.

Had I been able to preach my Ash Wednesday sermon, it was to focus on the phrase from Isaiah 58 that has long captivated me – "You shall be called repairers of the breach..." Everywhere we look, we find breaches among God's children – family relationships that are broken; polarization between different cultures, social classes, or political leanings; churches coming apart at the national level because they cannot come to agreement on certain social issues – breaches are more common than long term community, and certainly easier. We don't seem to want to hang in there with each other and understand the viewpoint of someone else, even when we disagree with it. We are astonishingly creative when it comes to dividing ourselves into "us" and "them." And yet, Isaiah called the Israelites to be "repairers of the breach" – bridge builders, reconcilers. Exploring that idea more fully is how I wanted to begin our Lenten worship focus – which in my head I have called "Welcoming the Stranger." If we are to love others as God loves them (and as God loves us), we have to be able to look past our differences and find the common ground we have as human beings and children of God.

The concept of Christian hospitality is nothing new. We all know that Jesus taught that we should open our hearts and homes to the outcast, the stranger, the unclean. I do think, though, that we have to think about this core part of discipleship in new ways, given the cultural climate

in which we live. We might not personally know families who have been separated at our country's southern border, but we have to be concerned about it. That is not "someone else's problem." There could be people right here in our congregation, whom we DO know personally, who are either affected or have family members affected by our nation's failure to protect the children of undocumented adults. Just as we have had to re-examine who our neighbor is, and what it means to be a neighbor, we also have to prayerfully consider who the "stranger" or "alien" is among us. It might turn out that the "stranger" looks a lot like us in a lot of ways. Furthermore, we do not engage in such discernment to find a scapegoat, someone we can blame for all the ills in our society and abuse with impunity. On the contrary, these are people who deserve our compassion and solidarity. I'm very excited about the new ministry to refugees that our Mission Commission is setting up with Sligo Seventh Day Adventist Church – you'll be hearing more about that in the weeks ahead as well. It's one way that we can be faithful to the biblical directive to love the ones whom God loves. That really is what it boils down to – if we love the ones God loves, we have to be all in, full stop. God will just keep expanding the circle, even when we try to contract it.

What intrigues me and gets me interested in exploring this topic with you all over the next few weeks is the breadth of the biblical direction on this. Of course our primary call is to follow Jesus, but he was taking his cues from the torah and the prophets. This call to welcome the stranger is embedded throughout the biblical story. Today, we look at just one of the examples in the law, and through this season we will look at the prophets, the gospels, and the letters. We still will just barely scratch the surface of what the Bible has to say about this, but I hope that looking at these passages together will give us a firm sense of who we are to be in the world if we genuinely want to love those whom God loves.

These last verses of Deuteronomy 10 conclude a historical review (beginning in chapter 8) of all of God's gracious dealings with Israel. The apex of that relationship is the exodus from slavery in Egypt – that event defines who Israel is as a people and the obligation that they have toward God. Moses has reached the point in his sermon in which, after reviewing all of God's acts in history, he will remind Israel of what they owe God in return.

This section actually begins with verse 12, which goes like this: "So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you?" That might sound familiar, because the prophet Micah later picks it up in what is probably his best known passage. Micah answers that question with the often quoted words "to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Those words don't precisely mirror what Moses said, but there are parallels – they certainly do not cancel each other out. Here is how Moses responds to his own rhetorical question: "Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...and to keep the commandments of the Lord, *for your own well-being*. Those last words are telling – if we follow the directions of God, things are better for our neighbors, no doubt. But they are also better for us – we are healed as well when we commit to being part of healing the world. We are made more whole when we love the ones whom God

loves.

Listen to verse 16: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.” That’s an odd choice of words – but we have to remember that the rite of circumcision was the primary way Israelites identified themselves as God’s covenant people. I’ve wondered how women were identified, but I suppose that’s a conversation for another day. The term “circumcision of the heart” signified an opening of the mind, an intentional directing of the will toward God. So that instruction sets the stage for this next set of directives. “Open your minds and hearts,” God essentially says to the Israelites, “because I am going to ask you to do some things that are not easy.”

Verse 17, where I started reading this morning, is the point where Moses gets specific. He reminds us that God “is not partial and takes no bribes.” In other words, we are all equal in God’s sight—equally indebted to God and equally responsible to love the ones whom God loves. And, there are no shortcuts. The hard work of living in relationship is the task set before us. Then Moses lists three groups of people – the widow, the orphan, and the stranger – whom God loves and provides with the basic needs of food and clothing. Seems like that is the minimum we also should do.

It’s significant that in the next verse Moses lifts out one group especially, even above widows and orphans, whom the Israelites are admonished to care for – the stranger. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Israelites know what it is to be in a strange place that is not their home. They understand (or should understand) what it is like to be thought of as inferior or odd because of looking different or practicing different customs. Because they have been an oppressed and enslaved people, God hopes that they will especially care for the ones who have been oppressed.

Given the context in which we find these words, it’s clear that these practices are not an auxiliary part of life in God’s covenant community – they are the means by which the community is identified in the first place. These are the specific ways that Moses is telling the Hebrews to walk in God’s ways, loving and serving God. Moses’ words shaped who Jesus was, and they continue to call to us across the generations. Something I am wondering about, and that I hope we can consider as we journey through Lent together – is there really even such a thing as a “stranger” or an “alien”? Yes, of course I know we (sadly) have to caution our children to be wary of people they do not know, because a few people have evil intent. But, in terms of who God is telling us to be concerned about, who has the right to exist, who should be treated with dignity...maybe there are no strangers. Maybe there are only sisters and brothers we have not met yet. When we learn to love as God loves, I suspect that these “strangers” will become a lot less frightening, and a lot more like you and me. May it be so.

Amen.

