

October 29, 2023

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matthew 22:34-40

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

<sup>37</sup>He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

-----

It has been over 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church, starting what is known as the Protestant Reformation. It has been over 500 years since his first translation of the Bible into the vernacular, his country’s common language.

What most Western Christians do not understand anymore is how revolutionary the Bible is. The Bible was the reason for the uprising of the peasants of Europe, not Luther’s theology. The people heard the full Bible stories for the first time and understood the stories to be about the liberation of people in servitude, in poverty.

Something very similar happened in Central and South America when some Roman Catholic priests offered Bible studies to the poor and illiterate. It was the birth of what is known as Liberation Theology. I have no doubt that the stories told about Jesus by the early church spoke the same message to people oppressed by the powers of this world.

The revolutionary power of the Bible has lost its sting in Western society. The truth is we do not want to be liberated. We like our possessions and our comfort. Why would we want to give any of this up? We are all in favor of the rest of the world enjoying the comforts we enjoy. The inconvenient truth is our world could not sustain our living standard for all humanity.

Truthfully, that is not the only problem we might have with the Bible. Many years ago a young woman in my congregation challenged me in regards to the Bible. It seems she had been put to the test at college, both by atheists and conservative Christians, about the Christian faith and especially the role of the Bible. She had done quite a bit of reading of the Bible and found much of it difficult to deal with. The Old Testament stories of God telling people to massacre their enemies, the Psalmist desiring to dash the heads of babies against the rocks, and lots of other God-sanctioned violent acts against just about everybody. It made her wonder why, in a place like church, which speaks of God as being love, would I accept such a violent God.

She then pointed out that the whole Bible seems to be written by men, who, because they are male, turn God into a male, which in turn makes men appear God-like to the world.

If that wasn’t enough ammunition for an argument to ignore the Bible, she added that the Bible seems to need a professional to interpret it, which makes a lay person wonder why they should even bother taking the time to read the Bible, if they can’t understand it anyway. And, what makes one “professional” right and another wrong? Which brought her to the fact that she struggles with the religious right who claim the Bible as authoritative, their interpretation is right, and she, apparently, is condemned to hell.

As she is laying this all out for me, we came to the realization that the problem may not be the Bible, rather that some people have turned the Bible into their god, and often this god is used in a violent, hurtful manner. What are we to do? Throw the Bible out and look for a modern telling of faith stories that are more inclusive and non-violent, ones we believe in, because they support our view of the world? Not a chance!

The problem is not with the Bible. The problem lies with our understanding of what the Bible really is. In the last hundred years people have begun to confuse the words of the Bible with the opening words of

John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." John was referring to Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, as the Word made flesh, not the words of scripture.

The Bible is not God incarnate. It is the witness of God's presence in the world. The words of the Bible tell of how people experienced God in their lives. The writers' words come with all the cultural limitations of the times in which they wrote their stories, such as men seeing God as male, because that is how they viewed the world.

Saying this is not the same as saying the Bible stories are lies. They are true stories, not because they happened in the sense we understand as historically accurate. They are true stories, because the timeless truth of God's presence, which is, ultimately, beyond our understanding, shines through their life stories.

The witness accounts in the Bible tell us what they have experienced and seen, putting into words experiences and visions that often cannot be fully expressed through words. Knowing this about the Bible writers should encourage us to read the Bible with this question in mind: "Where in my life have I experienced God in this way?"

With this in mind let's turn to today's scripture readings. The Hebrew Scriptures are pretty straight forward. Moses is sharing the words he hears from God. They are words of how people are to live with one another, if they want to live in a healthy community with God.

Each one of these rules read in today's lesson from Leviticus – do not slander; do not hate; do not take vengeance or hold a grudge – are rules meant to create a loving, healthy community. They are rules that we are to live by. When we do, we are not only validating the truth of these words, we are showing others how to be in relationship with God as well.

For example: God told Moses, "You shall not render an unjust judgment." This continues to be the rules of a healthy community today. It reminds me of a Cornel West quote: "Justice is what love looks like in public."

What is true of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, is true of the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament. If you only remember three verses in the Bible, these from Matthew's Gospel would be the ones to hold on to: "'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 the one hand this really is all you need to know about God and the teachings of Jesus to live your life well. Augustine once said, "Love God, and do whatever you please." The assumption being that your love of God will keep you from breaking God's law; God's law being revealed in Jesus.

Which brings me back to the Bible: On this Reformation Sunday it is important to remind ourselves of the significance of the Bible. Not because it is the Word of God – that is Jesus the Christ – rather because it is such an accurate witness of God's presence in the world. And when we examine the words of the witnesses we are brought to an understanding that the love of God leads us to love of neighbor – not the neighbor we like, not the person we find acceptable, rather all God's children, friend and foe alike.

In God's love there is never a rejection of a person. There can be a rejection of violence, of mental and physical abuse, of anything that harms anyone or any thing in God's creation. Jesus' example challenges us to love, and turn the rest over to God's providence.

When we read and try to live by the Bible stories, we not only contribute to making a healthy community, we are, in turn, being ourselves witnesses of God's presence in our lives and are helping to write the Bible's Continuing Testament of God in the world; the Testament of God's presence and love in our lives, told through the lived, shared stories of our lives.

The Bible is important and on this Reformation Sunday may we recommit ourselves to studying the witness of God's presence in our world in the words of the Bible. Then try to grow our relationship with God and one another by following the guidance of those who have gone before. In this way we have the possibility of being ourselves witnesses for future generations.

Just as the stories of all Jesus' followers for over two thousand years are part of the Continuing Testament of God in the world, so too can our stories be. May God bless each one of us as we strive in faith to grow in our love of God and our neighbor. Amen.