

What's Love Got to do With It?

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

October 5, 2014

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:10-11 (NRSV)

Today is the first Sunday of October. For years first Sundays have meant gathering at the Lord's Table to share in a ritual meal that fortifies us with grace, love, and forgiveness. This particular first Sunday has also been adopted by Christian communities around the globe as World Communion Sunday. We are proud to note that this tradition began at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania nearly 80 years ago. What it means is that more than 2 billion Christians will share in this sacramental meal that focuses on love and obedience. That's nearly 1/3 of the world's population.

Yesterday our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Yom Kippur considered their most reverent day. After days of preparation, introspection, and asking the forgiveness of those whom they may have injured in any way, they come before God seeking atonement. The searing question at stake is whether they will be included in the Book of Life. Yesterday also marked the end of the Hajj in Mecca, the pilgrimage that our Muslim neighbors are to make at least once in their lifetime. The solemn festival of sacrifice, Eid al Adha, marks this day of deep reverence that remembers the ram caught in the thicket just as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son. Muslims understand the story to involve Abraham's elder son Ishmael. Believers are not to partake in the

celebratory meal unless they have made an active effort to reconcile with others. And lastly, yesterday was St. Francis day which marks the day he was laid to rest at age 44. Best known as the patron saint of animals and the environment he was also passionate about the Eucharist and is the first person known to receive the stigmata and bear the wounds of Jesus Christ. It is a weekend when all three traditions focus on reconciliation, forgiveness, love, and peace.

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If we use this special confluence of events to embrace all who worship the God of Abraham and his descendants then suddenly two thirds of the world's population is joined spiritually in celebrations of forgiveness and peace. In Westchester just such an effort is beginning among the major Abrahamic faiths in an effort that grew out of the Episcopal Church. In times such as these, it is helpful to remember that in the 9th through 12th centuries, prior to the Crusades, prior to the Inquisition, there was a time of peace, harmony and intellectual development that is largely untaught in schools today. It was a time when Islam was ascendant and

represented prosperous, tolerant, intellectually curious communities. Guided by the Quran and such teachings as "the ink of a scholar is more holy than the blood of a martyr", they preserved classic works of antiquity including Plato and Aristotle, that might otherwise have been lost. In an empire that stretched from Spain to Afghanistan, Wikipedia says non-Muslims were allowed to flourish relative to their treatment in the Christian Byzantine Empire.

This morning we will take some time to reflect on peace and what we imagine a world at peace might be like. Let's begin with clarifying what we mean by peace. If peace is simply the absence of conflict then we would conclude the world was in a better place when military strongmen controlled much of the world. But dictators leave little room for justice; there is seldom concern for the welfare of the masses except to tamp down any thoughts of rebellion. And yet we see how easily a nation slips back into the false security of the "devil you know". As we read just a few weeks ago in the story of the Exodus, the Israelites complained bitterly to Moses and to God that they had been forced to escape the bonds of slavery under Pharaoh only to be abandoned for certain death in the desert. We hear it in the stifled rumblings on the streets of Moscow where an overwhelming majority support an "elected" president who rules like a Czar. Is that peace? We see its effect in modern Egypt which represented the very heart of the Arab Spring. Demonstrations in Tahrir Square forced a lifelong dictator from power and the election of a new President. Barely a year later, that President was removed from office without due process and the same military that kept Mubarak in power was elected back into office. Have the Egyptians found peace?

Would you say there is peace in the United States? If yes, how do we account for Ferguson, Missouri? Is there peace at our southern border where tens of thousands have been turned away or held in detention for a legal process that may take years? Is there peace for the nearly 2.3 million people in US prisons or the 4.8 million who are on parole or probation? Is there peace for young families where the parents must work a total of four or five jobs at below "living wage", to pay the rent and make ends meet? So we must ask ourselves, "what is peace?"

Reflecting briefly on this morning's Parable of the Wicked Tenants, there seems to be very little peace in the vineyard. First, let me be very explicit: this is not a parable that casts blame on the Jews for Christ's death. And neither should it be understood as evidence that the Christian church has supplanted or is somehow superior to Judaism - what is called supersessionism in academic circles. There is no room for that kind of thinking on a day we celebrate the richness of what we share in our Abrahamic faith traditions.

Stan Saunders, a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, has suggested a fresh interpretation through the lens of economic justice. Saunders suggests that the landowner is representative of the 1%. In first century Palestine that would include the chief priests and elders who were themselves often wealthy landowners. The tenants would represent the rest of us. The tenant/workers had been kept on a short leash by the landowner with a fence put around the vineyard and a watchtower to oversee their activities. We don't know any details about the economic arrangement, only that the landowner leased the property to the

tenants and then left the country. An absentee landowner; a billionaire with multiple portfolios and estates in multiple countries; a mega-fund with no connection to the company, its products, the communities where it operates, its customers or its employees. Once a quarter they receive a financial statement that shows a number.

Then Jesus says, "When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce." (v. 34) Do we understand that they were meant to collect all of the produce leaving nothing behind as compensation for the tenants' labor? It would not be inconsistent with this translation but we cannot say with any certainty. But in a time when the wealth gap continues to widen; when absentee landowners and those who control capital flows exert disproportionate control, we must ask ourselves about the nature of the peace we enjoy in this country.

Frederick Buechner in this morning's quote suggests that, for Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love. Is that a definition that seems more in tune with our Christian values? Or does it seem hopelessly naïve? Is the time of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. long since past? Wasn't it Tina Turner who asked "what's love got to do with it?" In a world where beheadings are video-graphed and go viral; where being in the right religion but the wrong denomination will cost you your life, what *does* love have to do with it? Can we love ISIS to the peace process? Can love win the Civil War in Syria? Can love possibly change the political calculus of someone like Vladimir Putin?

Perhaps my transition from the world of finance to the realm of the heart is incomplete for as yet I do not see love as an effective weapon against this type of tyranny. I might suggest that King and Gandhi were up against a rational and somewhat compassionate opposition. Far too much blood was shed along the way but there was just enough goodness for truth to win in the end. That may not be the case with radical fundamentalism or egocentric imperialism. In the first instance love may be ineffective in containing and degrading threats that no longer respond to the norms of present-day civilization. If the cancerous evil we confront places no value on human life it may not be possible for other humans to love them back to the light. At least not without too great a sacrifice. And observations like that jar us right back to the table that is set before us. How great a sacrifice God was willing to make for us. How sadly unheeded.

But reflecting on our own country and most of the rest of the world, love's got everything to do with it. As the pendulum of social sensibility swings back and forth through history I believe our present understanding of capitalism has gone too far. All the love of the most successful economic platform yet devised has been squeezed out and the safety net has become ineffective for too many. The most certain formula for creating radicalized communities is to deny their basic liberties and limit economic opportunity to mere subsistence. While it may seem counterintuitive, especially to those who inherited their wealth, it is vital to the 1% – indeed for us all – that active steps be taken to narrow the wealth gap. Am I confusing love with economics? I don't think so. Pure capitalism knows no limits in its

quest for maximizing profits. If that equation is not tempered with love then safety nets disappear, the mentally challenged are incarcerated rather than treated and those least skilled struggle to survive with a minimum wage that is substantially less than a living wage. For love to flourish, there needs to be relative safety and human dignity.

But love also has to do with how we see our neighbor. If we look at our neighbor and hear only a difference in accent, see only a difference of skin color or type of hair, or surmise from outward appearances a lower social status, then we have not looked with love. If we say we cannot apologize but insist in holding grudges we forget all that Scripture tells us about the importance of love. These are the hatreds of the Hatfields and the McCoys; the Protestants and Catholics; the Sunnis and the Shiites; these are the hatreds that are raging out of control in too many parts of the world.

On a weekend such as this, when all of the Abrahamic faiths are focused on reconciliation and peace we do well to remember what Mother Teresa and other Saints have said that, "All works of love are works of peace." And that:

Christians, Muslims, Hindus, believers and non-believers
have the opportunity with us to do works of love
have the opportunity with us to share the joy of
loving and come to realize God's presence.

Hindus become better Hindus.

Catholics become better Catholics.

Muslims become better Muslims.

What's love got to do with it? Everything.

Amen