

## “How to Love Our Neighbors”

October 29, 2023

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

Loving our neighbor is a central ethic for Jews and Christians alike. In Leviticus, as we just heard, it's part of what makes the people holy. Holiness is an important value for God's people. It's not enough that they're chosen or that they're related to Abraham and led out of slavery into the Promised Land. They're also called to be holy. In fact, their condition is compared to God's: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” That's a pretty high standard. Most of us would feel a bit inadequate to compare our holiness to God's.

So, the long list of behaviors we find in Leviticus that are forbidden or required kind of makes sense. Without a real specific set of activities to follow how else could they know if they're living up to this standard? We often get bogged down in the details of a set of rules like this; we want to know why certain types of foods are prohibited or why it's forbidden to mix different types of textiles in clothing. But I think we're missing the forest for the trees. It seems to me the purpose these codes serve isn't to control every aspect of life. I think their purpose is to cultivate a sense of mindfulness. Rather than stumbling along and just reacting to whatever happens around us, we're called to be intentional in what we do.

The holiness codes provide a mechanism for moving through the world with purpose, thoughtfully, and not absently. To follow Torah, to really keep the Law, you have to be aware of what's happening around you and present to each moment. And you have to be mindful of how your actions affect others. You cannot be holy in a vacuum. Holiness requires a context. So even though a person might keep these rules privately, they do that because they're part of a larger community. Even when they're alone, they still have a responsibility to the community.

I think that reveals a reality we don't always like to admit. Nothing we do privately is completely removed from the network of relationships in which we live. What we do in the world affects people around us even if we don't see those effects directly. The command to love our neighbor is a call to remain aware of the impact our actions have in the world.

I was reminded of that recently when folks from here and from the Amherst and Clarence Presbyterian churches, along with some members from First Shiloh Baptist Church in Buffalo, met to hear a lecture from Dr. Henry-Louis Taylor, professor of Regional and Urban Planning at UB. His topic was about how conditions on Buffalo's east side came to be. And he used a study that came out in 2021 called “The Harder We Run,” which looked at the progress made in the Buffalo Black community since 1990. It's not a very happy story. There have been some modest gains among a few Black residents, but overall access to good-paying jobs, higher education and quality healthcare have fallen behind for these residents.

In the report, which Dr. Taylor helped write, we're told, “Black Buffalo did not progress. Everything changed, but everything remained the same.” It points out that even though the city of Buffalo has a Black mayor and there are many Black people in other leadership posts, those changes have not lifted the prospects of the majority of Black residents. And the single most

important factor that's cited is "racial residential segregation." Through the system of redlining neighborhoods where Black people live, a system begun during the Great Depression as a way to help homeowners avoid foreclosure or to obtain a mortgage, the Black population of Buffalo has been concentrated on the East Side. As a result there is a much lower rate of homeownership because banks have been discouraged from investing mortgage dollars in those neighborhoods. But there's also a much lower investment of resources in those neighborhoods leading to poor sidewalks and road maintenance, fewer trees and parks, higher traffic levels and worse health outcomes.

My mother always told me that her father, even though his father was a staunch Republican, was a great admirer and supporter of FDR because his policies made it possible for him to keep a house where my mother and her brother were raised. Decisions made long ago that were meant to help the broader population by making it possible for folks to own their own homes and have the stability that provides were designed in such a way that a particular segment of the population was left out. As a result generations of our neighbors have suffered needlessly.

When Jesus was asked, in this version of that story in Matthew's gospel, what is the greatest commandment, his response was probably not that surprising. Everyone would have expected the first part. It comes from the famous affirmation known as the "*Shema*." It's the pronouncement every devout Jew makes each morning when they rise: "*Sh'ma Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one." These words in Deuteronomy are followed by what's known as the "*v'ahavta*," which means "you shall love." Some years ago my friend Rabbi Alex at Shir Shalom gave me a copy of a prayer book that's used in Shabbat services. It has all the different parts of the service, the readings and prayers, along some commentary from each one. In the *Sh'ma* section it says, "The core of our worship is not a prayer at all, but a cry to our fellow-Jews and fellow-humans. In it we declare that God is one—which is also to say that humanity is one, that life is one, that joys and sufferings are all one—for God is the source that binds them all together."

By elevating the commandment to love God, the God who binds all things together, Jesus eradicates any divisions between us. And of all the other commandments he might have chosen, some 613 of them, he pairs this one with it: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." And if loving God is how we acknowledge our connection with all humanity, then loving our neighbor is a form of loving God. When we allow our neighbors to live in conditions that cause harm, that prevent them from having access to capital for starting businesses or from the tools needed to succeed in college or from affordable healthcare, we are neglecting our love for God. And while you and I aren't directly responsible for those conditions, we didn't make the rules and we don't control how resources are allocated, we have benefited while others have suffered. We have a responsibility for the well-being of our neighbors, to love them as we love our selves.

Loving our neighbors in our context begins, I think, by hearing their stories and acknowledging their circumstances. I attended a meeting recently of Black and white clergy where it was asked how white folks can be better allies for Black folks. One of my colleagues said, "By believing a Black person when they say they've been harmed by racism." Those claims are often met with excuses or skepticism. Loving our neighbors means trusting them and their

perceptions of what they experience. It can also mean setting aside our own defensiveness and admitting there are times when we're guilty of racial bias even when we aren't aware of it.

Another way we love our neighbors is to seek remedies for conditions that are unfair. Just as God's love for us isn't abstract but has concrete expression through the creation around us and the relationships we share, so our love for neighbors needs to be concrete. Sometimes literally by insisting roads and sidewalks be maintained. It can be as complex as advocating for more investments in neighborhoods that lack good grocery and drugstores to as simple as greeting people of color in your neighborhood with warmth and welcome instead of suspicion. Because our neighbors are everywhere, they're everyone we encounter each day, we have infinite opportunities to express our love for them.

Finally, getting back to those holiness codes and their purpose, maybe the most important way to love our neighbors is to be aware of the condition of other people's lives. We're called to be mindful, to pay attention, as we move through the world. One of the confessional prayers I grew up saying in church had this line in it: "We walk away from neighbors in need, wrapped up in our own concerns." It's so easy in a society that promotes hyper-individualism the way ours does to lose touch with the needs of those around us. Through Torah, through the teachings of Jesus, through the encouragement of people like Paul to be imitators of Christ, we're given a path to lead us out of self-absorption and orient ourselves toward others. That simple shift of focus makes the difference between a world of suffering and a world of joy. By loving our neighbor we are loving God and fulfilling all that God asks of us as disciples of Christ.

Amen