

Love your Neighbour

October 29, 2023

A couple of weeks ago I was travelling out to Wakaw and listening to 'The Current' on CBC radio. Matt Galloway was interviewing the renowned anthropologist Jane Goodall. You may remember her as the chimpanzee lady. From the age of twenty-one Jane committed her life to studying and understanding chimpanzees in their own jungle habitat. Jane is now 89 and Galloway invited her to look back on her life. In one comment Ms. Goodall, the life-long scientist, found herself compelled to use the word 'God'. She described her experience of living alone in the jungle for weeks on end watching and interacting with chimpanzees. She said that these moments, alone in the jungle, led her to an experience of absolute oneness with all of creation. She was no longer an observer; she was part of a whole. She struggled to find words to describe this experience but ultimately concluded that this profoundly spiritual event was an experience of God.

The second comment that stood out for me in this interview was Goodall's response to the question as to why the world finds itself in the midst of so much conflict. Bringing an anthropological lens to her response, Goodall observed that human conflict was the result of in-group and out-group rivalries. The out-group wants to be included and the in-group, feeling their security threatened, wants to keep them out. The result was conflict for the chimpanzees and, by extension, for every other creature in the animal kingdom including humans. These two ideas stayed with me as I prepared this morning's sermon. God is the experience of being at one with all that is. Conflict in the consequence of in-group/out-group rivalries – the very opposite of oneness.

Later that evening I sat down to watch the worship service recorded the day before at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary. Early in the service their minister for justice and outreach came to the microphone to ask folks to consider engaging in a day of fasting and prayer for peace later in the week. By way of introduction, she made this statement: "I want to announce a day of fasting and prayer for the middle east. They are caught in a tension that is ancient, a tension that is decades old and a conflict that is recent." Her statement put the events of the last few weeks into context for me.

'A tension that is ancient.' Recall with me some of the earliest stories of our Jewish ancestors. Recall Abraham and Sarah, the grandparents of it all. Our Bible tells us that God visited them and promised that if they would follow, God would supply them with a child, the beginning of a great and mighty nation. From that starting point the Jewish people emerged wandering the middle east looking for a land to call home. Their trek took them across many kilometres, including enslavement in Egypt, and then freed to wander another forty years across the desert landscape. Eventually they finally arrived in the promised land, the land that had been promised to Sarah and Abraham, a land filled with milk and honey, a land where someone – the Canaanites – were already living. In this search for a home, the Hebrew people, whom we call Israelites, settled in a land already inhabited by the Canaanites, whose descendants might be known as modern day Palestinians.

‘Caught in a tension that is ancient, a tension that is decades old.’ The ancient Israelites were always being pushed out and pushed around, taken into captivity and expelled from their homes - by the Assyrians, by the Babylonians, by the Romans until they became a wandering people dispersed throughout Europe and the rest of the world. We know too well that in recent history these dispersed Jews were gathered up from around the countries of Europe and forced into concentration camps where over 6 million died. In the aftermath of the second world war, and aware of the tremendous suffering of the Jewish people, the United Nations passed a resolution recommending the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. Palestine was under British control at the time, so Britain proceeded to enact this resolution. Almost immediately, in 1948, the first Arab-Israeli war broke out with Arab countries invading the state of Israel. The animosity and squabble over the land has continued to this day.

‘They are caught in a tension that is ancient, a tension that is decades old and a conflict that is recent.’ The Gaza Strip emerged as an Egyptian administered territory for Palestinians until the war of 1967 when the Gaza strip came under Israeli occupation. Palestinians continued to live there but now under Israeli oversight. With a population of 2 million people on just 365 square kilometres of land, Gaza is considered the third most densely populated place in the world. Due to the density of the population, poverty, unemployment and unrest prevail, exacerbated by Israel placing very tight restrictions on Palestinian’s access to work, water and electricity. Some human rights organizations refer to the Gaza strip as nothing more than an open-air prison.

This troubled history and the current conflict stand in stark contrast and bitter irony to the scriptures we read this morning in which Jesus tells his audience that the two greatest commandments are love of God and love of neighbour. It is interesting to note that Jesus took these words from his own Jewish religious tradition. In the book of Deuteronomy, the people are commanded to love God with all their heart and soul and mind. In the book of Leviticus, the writer provides many specific instructions about caring for others, eventually concluding with the overarching statement, “love your neighbour as you love yourself.”

Jesus knew these passages well and so when he is asked about the greatest commandment, he names these – but, unlike the original writers he combines the passages as if they belong together. To love God implies loving one’s neighbour and when we love our neighbour, we implicitly love the God that lives in them. This love cannot be taken apart – it is what Jane Goodall observed in the jungle - that she and the jungle were one and in that moment she named the experience ‘God’. There was no separation here, no superior human scientist, no second-class chimpanzee. God is in all. The call to love the neighbour is a call to eliminate in-group and out-group divisions, there is no ‘them,’ only ‘us’.

In Luke’s version of this story Jesus’ audience doesn’t get it. Still unable to grasp that every human and all of creation are to be neighbours. Confused, they ask Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” So, Jesus gives them a story, now familiar to us. (Do you remember the story?) There was a man walking on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, he is beaten by robbers and left on the road to die. The people charged with

being religious and with keeping the commandments fail to recognize this wounded man as their neighbour. Yet, his supposed enemy, an outcast, a Samaritan, stops and bandages the man's wounds. The crowd falls silent. That is our neighbour, they ponder. Is God suggesting we love 'them' (those in the out-group)?

We do not live in the middle east. We do not carry the weight of centuries of division. We will not solve the problem of the middle east here this morning. But we are witness to the terrible price paid when we do not love the neighbour. God is calling to us for the sake of civilization, for the sake of the planet, for our own sake, to love our neighbour. God's call to love the neighbour is not about sending the welcome wagon or being friendly over the back fence, rather God calls us to look at those we would place in the 'out-group' and discern how to let them in.

Who do you have the most trouble letting in? Who seems least likely to be your neighbour? The trans-gender youth who might disrupt notions of family? The residential school survivor who won't stop talking about their pain? The climate denier who refuses to use their compost bin? The union leader who encourages her members to strike? The business owner who complains when the minimum wage goes up? The guy at the top of the freeway who relentlessly asks for your money? The woman in the call centre who is hard to understand on the phone? The relative whose views are polar opposite to yours? Loving our neighbour seems simple when it involves inviting the person next door for coffee, but the story of the Good Samaritan expands our understanding of neighbour to include those most unlike us.

Of course, this is not intended to be a 'pollyanna' love of neighbour in which we simply act nice to one another. Clearly the situation in the middle east requires many hours of conversation, negotiation, and compromise but true peace will not be achieved until both sides recognize the right of the other to live upon that land. So too, in our small spheres of influence, the task is greater than merely smiling and enduring those who think, act or look different than us. The task is to acknowledge that we are all children of God. God has created an in-group to which we all belong. We must love our neighbour fiercely even when such love requires hours of conversation, negotiation and compromise, for to do otherwise is to declare that someone falls outside the love of God.

It would seem that all we can do for the middle east is to pray and we must not discount our prayers. But the crisis in the middle east calls us to evaluate how we live in the worlds **we** inhabit? What neighbour is waiting to be known by us? How can we take down the barriers that keep us apart? How can we contribute to peace in the world beginning in our own city? The key rests in the ancient wisdom of one we have called Saviour -"Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbour as yourself." Amen.

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