



"Love of Neighbor in a Time of Darkness and Death"

Scripture – Matthew 22:34-40

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 29, 2023

For many years, I thought that being a Christian meant to adhere to a certain set of beliefs. No matter how dubious some of those beliefs seemed, to be a Christian I had to affirm them. If I could not force my brain to accept them, I worried that my faith was shaky. Moreover, I thought that this *belief-centered faith* was what faith had meant since the time of Jesus. It was a great relief to discover that this way of understanding Christianity has only been around for about five centuries. It stemmed from the time dominant voices in the church opposed the new ways of perceiving reality thanks to the scientific revolution. Many church leaders rebelled against the new knowledge out of fear that the church would unravel.

In today's familiar passage, a religious leader who taught and interpreted religious law, challenged Jesus. He asked, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" In other words, Jesus was being pressured to spell out clearly: what is at the core of a faithful life? And Jesus did *not* respond: "You must adhere to certain ideas about God and about me that you may find difficult to believe." Jesus did not equate the core of religious faith with believing things that do not hold up well under the microscope of reason and critical thinking. Instead, Jesus answered, "Love God with your entire being – *including your mind*. Then, without pausing, Jesus added a second piece that cannot be uncoupled from loving God: "Love your neighbor as yourself." At the core of what it means to be a Christian, is to give ourselves to a way of life based on love of God and love of neighbor.

Love. Isn't the word loaded with emotion when we talk about the bond we share with our spouses, companions, children, and close friends? The word points to our most rewarding experiences in life and even the reason for living. But the word can also be drained of its power by its overuse. We love our morning cup of coffee, we love our favorite sports team, and we love our new car.

The biblical notion of love is weightier and far more challenging. The Apostle Paul said that love "bears all things and endures all things." In the First Letter of John, we read: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Also, "Those who say, 'I love God,' but hate their brothers or sisters, are

liars." And, of course, the most demanding word comes from the lips of Jesus when he said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

The terrorist attack by Hamas and the war in Gaza are weighing very heavy on me these days. Thousands of innocent children, women, and men have already been killed, and the specter of many, many more dying is horrifying. So, when I first looked up today's gospel lectionary reading, my first thought was: Skip it! Preaching about love at a moment like this could easily sound tone deaf. So, I thumbed the pages to today's Old Testament lectionary reading from the Book of Leviticus to see if it might seem more palatable. The final verse in that passage is this: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

The tug of God's Spirit seemed to be saying that Christian love is not simply focused on sweet and gentle "Kum Ba Yah" moments. Love of neighbor is precisely the passage to be preached in a time of darkness and death. So, how do I see the present moment in light of today's passage?

Israel, like every country, has the obligation to defeat terrorists and to defend its citizens against attack in accordance with international law. Hamas militants must be brought to justice for their despicable and inhumane crimes. All hostages must be released.

On the other side, as the Israel Defense Forces seek to destroy Hamas, they are killing thousands of innocent citizens – most of whom are Christians and Muslims who have no love for Hamas. Israel will lose moral credibility and commit war crimes if they follow the advice of one United States Senator who is angling to become the chief cheerleader for the assault on Gaza. He encouraged the Israeli military to quote: "Level the place."

In that same vein, some Israeli leaders have called for "bombing without distinction," and "destruction rather than accuracy."¹ Perhaps more chilling, Israel's Defense Minister said, "We are fighting human animals."²

Fury and revenge fuel conflict and killing and set off a deadly cycle of retribution with no end point. To right a wrong, an eye for an eye can feel disturbingly satisfying. However, in the long run, it ignites an ever-widening circle of blindness and death. In Israel/Palestine this cycle has been devouring people for 75 years. But it is not predestined to continue. Human beings have the freedom to choose.

Killing and kidnapping civilians is immoral and unjustified. The Reverend Dan Clendenin wrote recently, "Posting executions online and dragging mutilated bodies through the streets is barbaric. So is starving civilians of food, water, fuel, electricity, and medicine." And I would add bombing with white phosphorus. I believe the Israeli government still has an opportunity to take the moral high ground and to garner international support, but time is running out.

In the past few days a well-known journalist (Nicholas Kristof) wrote, "When you care about some humans but not others, you've lost your humanity...If you care about human life only in Israel or only in Gaza, then you don't actually care about humanity...If your moral compass is attuned to the suffering

of only one side, your compass is broken, and so is your humanity.” The pain of a grieving Israeli parent is no different than the anguish of a mother or father in Gaza. There’s no “hierarchy of human life...all lives are of equal value.”³

Focusing on exacting retribution and evening the score is a deadly trap. Leveling Gaza will not quell long-term violence. It will surely intensify hatred and most likely create new terrorists. There must be a plan for the day after. The question is whether that plan will be driven by the vengeful notion and the unreasoned delusion that the other side can be eliminated, or will it be driven by a plan that sets a foundation for basic human rights and peace for both sides?

Jesus did not call on us to love only those who were much like ourselves. Neighbor could mean someone who lived near or far. Neighbor could mean someone familiar or complete stranger. Neighbor could mean friends, but it could even mean an enemy.

Former Princeton Seminary professor, Nancy Duff, pointed out that we generally think of love as including an emotional component. Love is something we **feel** for another. But how can we possibly love neighbors we do not know or do not trust or do not like? Duff points out that loving our neighbor does not require feelings of affection. Loving our neighbor means that we do what is right for the common good. We seek what is best for a person as long as it is also just and will not harm others.⁴ We can have strong disagreements without being hateful or malicious. If we are seeking what is just and aiming for the common good, then we are fulfilling the command to love our neighbor as ourselves.

A woman in our neighborhood is a vocal progressive who holds a disdain for all things Trump – and disdain is too mild a word. Nevertheless, she occasionally takes a casserole or a cake or fruit to two of her neighbors who are ill and both of whom are full force Trump supporters. She understands that an essential part of love is sympathy for anyone who suffers.

What bearing does this have on the terrorist attack by Hamas and the war on Gaza? In most situations, we fulfill the command to love our neighbor as ourselves when we treat others with the same respect, kindness, and consideration with which we wish to be treated. As Christians, you and I do not believe that the answer to evil is to respond with evil. I believe that what is first needed between the Israelis and Palestinians is empathy. They need to understand as best they can the suffering of each other.

Alon Ben-Meir was born in a Jewish family in Iraq but is now an American citizen. A senior fellow at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs, he is an expert on Middle East politics. He specializes in peace negotiations between Israel and the Arab states. For the past twenty-five years, he has been directly involved in diplomatic negotiations between Arabs and Israelis. *One year ago*, Dr. Ben-Meir wrote, “The danger that all concerned parties seem to overlook is that although on the surface the *status quo* between Israel and the Palestinians may prevail for a little longer, say three-to-four years, it cannot be sustained for much beyond that. It is bound to explode in the face of everyone who does not realize the urgency and the dire consequences in the absence of a solution. Indeed, it is not a matter of *if* but *when* the Palestinians will rise and resort to violence...And the Israelis who have been living in denial will sooner rather than later have to face the bitter truth. The Palestinian problem will not go away; it

will continue to haunt them and offer no respite...And whereas Israel can prevail militarily over any of its enemies...it cannot stop the most dangerous threat of all—the deadly erosion, resulting from its continuing brutal occupation, of that moral foundation on which the country was established.”⁵ He was just one of many people who were predicting that this eruption of violence was inevitable.

Just a few days ago, Dr. Ben-Meir wrote, “Although Israel has every right to defend itself and crush the irredeemable Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists who will not accept Israel’s reality, Israel must also remember that the vast majority of the Palestinian people want to live in peace, and accept Israel’s right to exist...Palestinians are ordinary people who want to live a normal life, just like any Israeli.”⁶

As we know, crisis can bring opportunity. I cling to hope that the terrible killing that will get worse before it subsides, will lead to a better day. I pray that the hundreds of thousands of Israelis that poured into the streets to protest the actions of their Prime Minister will pour into the streets again and demand that their government work out a way for Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace. After World War II, bitter enemies of one another in Europe found a way to forge a path to peace. There is no reason that Israelis and Palestinians cannot do the same.

On the second Westminster pilgrimage Camilla and I led to Israel/Palestine in 2014, our group met a Palestinian named, Aziz Abu Sarah. He invited all of us to his parents’ home in Bethany for a traditional Palestinian dinner. That night he told us about his older brother who several years earlier was arrested for throwing rocks at an Israeli military vehicle. He was just a teenager, but while he was in custody, he was beaten to death by the Israeli police.

Aziz could have turned into a radical militant against Israel. But instead, he leads tours to help people understand both sides of the conflict. He is also a member of a group called Combatants for Peace. Combatants for Peace is an Israeli-Palestinian organization that is “committed to non-violent action against the illegal Israeli occupation and all forms of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories. It was formed in 2006 by Palestinians and Israelis who had taken an active role in the cycle of violence and decided to work together to promote a peaceful solution through non-violent action. Originally, the activists were all ex-combatants: Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters. Today, members of the movement include men and women who have never played a military role in the conflict. They work tirelessly to educate people and to persuade them to work for peace.

Four days ago, they held an online meeting entitled “Holding on to Humanity and Hope.” Aziz recommended this poem:

“The day I’m killed,
my killer, rifling through my pockets,
will find travel tickets:
One to peace,
one to the fields and the rain,
and one to the conscience of humankind.

I beg you my dear killer: don't ignore them.
Don't waste such a thing,
But take and use the tickets.
Please, I beg you to go traveling."⁷

Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all people of the Book, and thus we are commanded by our God to love our neighbor which entails the extremely challenging task of working for justice and striving peace. May we be faithful.

NOTES

1. Jeremy Ben-Ami quoting various Israeli leaders in his post entitled, "Israel's Looming Ground Invasion," October 24, 2023.
2. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x02rCeusCI>)
3. Dan Clendenin quoting Nicholas Kristof in his three op-eds in the *New York Times* (October 11, 14, and 21, 2023).
4. Justin Horner, "The Tire Iron and the Tamale," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 6, 2011.
5. Alon Ben-Meir, "Hamas' Brutal Attack Could Have Been Avoided," October 9, 2023, in which he refers to the article he wrote October 2, 2022.
6. Alon Ben-Meir, "Hamas' Brutal Attack Could Have Been Avoided," October 9, 2023
7. Samih al-Qasem