

Holy Love

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 Ritual and holiness
Matthew 22:34-46 The greatest commandment

We are, once again, at the very heart of our spiritual heritage. These words from Leviticus, book of the law, take us to the very center, that commandment to love one another and to love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Those beautiful words from Leviticus that express that core of justice that is at the heart of the Hebrew tradition. This is the passage you use to argue against people who get all grumpy about the Old Testament because there's nothing in there that's nice, it's all nasty stuff. Well, it's not true. It's profoundly not true because it's Jesus' bible.

This is the kind of literature, the kind of scripture, where Jesus' heart was rooted, and his ministry was understood as a deep and transformative, profound living out of that heritage. So we have that beautiful expression of God's will for us to regard even the weakest, even the most helpless one in our midst with respect and dignity. Then Jesus, in this conversation with Pharisees and people who are trying to trap him or are challenging him by taking him into that very heritage and looking for a place to get it. What we hear in this story from Matthew is that he just talked circles around them and they just gave up because he just won, hands down the contest about really grasping the center of what God's will is. He said 'The whole of Torah comes down to that one centerpiece – to love God and to love one another as yourself.'

So from there, our whole Christian heritage grows into a way of living love in our world. We don't have that sentimental split between love and justice as if love is just a personal thing among us and our loved ones and that justice is something different way over there. That Levitical tradition and the way Jesus understood it and lived it out – justice, as my ethics professor used to say, is simply love writ large. This is the true, holy love, powerful, life-transforming, world-transforming holy love that is there at the heart of life. It has that abstract sense of being, that essence of our whole heritage on the one hand, but at the same time it touches us so profoundly practically into our lives. It touches everyday decisions and it touches the realities of the world around us, living this holy love, this love writ large, as justice.

I'll give you a couple of examples that are simply a couple of things that are on my mind a lot these days. One of them is this great controversy we have going on now about the tarsands and this enormous wealth of oil reserves that Alberta has and a world that's hungry for it, and the debate that's going on about whether we

should barrel ahead (no pun intended) and just exploit this resource as fast as we can and get all the money we can now, or whether we need more regard for the environmental impact and the effect on the economy and so on.

As some of you know, I made a trip up to Fort MacMurray a couple summers ago and took a walk with the native elders and the environmentalists and listened to what they had to say. I took the Suncor tour and took a look around the plan and learned what they had to say. My conclusion is that there is a polarity here that is artificial, that is not needed, this sense of opposite between whether the industry is given a green light to go ahead and develop that resource as fast as possible, or whether we need to shut it down because of the environmental impact. What I heard was an industry that was not saying we just want to disregard the environment and barrel ahead. There is a lot of care and concern about the water, about the effect on the land, the restoration, the controlling of pollution in the air.

On the other hand, the natives and the environmentalists were not saying, we need to shut this down because it's just wrong. They are working with the industry. But what was happening with the media and the way the government is approaching it is that it turns into a polarized kind of thing. What's needed is that middle ground and that's what our own inter-Church organization Kairos concluded when they went up there and did some studying and listening. They said that the present rate of production is sustainable, the approvals had already been given that will allow production to double its present rate, but there is pressure to do twice that again. They just said, we need to go with what is approved and not double it, not quadruple it. Just slow it down so that we have the time to learn how to do it right. It can be done clean. It doesn't have to be an ecological disaster. How do we achieve that middle ground? How do we achieve that unity that's there that says it can be done right? It doesn't have to be shut down, it doesn't have to be barrel ahead with no limits.

What I heard at the center there, and this was from the native people mostly, is a love for the land. Love your neighbour as yourself. Who is my neighbour? We are learning in this day and age that the whole environment, the whole planet, is our neighbour. We're not going to treat it right if we don't know how to love it. The Native people tell us that. The man I was walking with as we were walking around the tailings pond by the Syncrude plant, he pointed over to the middle of the tailings pond and he said, 'when I was a little boy, I gathered blueberries right there'. He wasn't saying shut it down. He was just saying 'I love this land'.

As long as the only way to develop this resource is without that love, there will never be a solution because that love, that justice love is the essence of the wisdom that's needed. We need both of our governments, provincial and federal, to bring that kind of wisdom to bear, to do the kind of regulation it takes to bring us to the center, to say we're not going to shut it down and we're not going to barrel ahead. We're going to do it right because we love the land and the land loves us. That's the crucial element that's missing. You see it even in the language. I referred to this as tarsands, but the industry has tried to clean up the image by calling it oilsands. The fact is, what's in that sand is not oil and it's not tar, it's bitumen. Have you ever heard anyone talking about bitumen-sands?

Maybe that's what we need, because the language is polarized whichever you choose to use. Maybe that's what the Church has to offer is that centering.

Another area where this holy love applies...this time of year we starting thinking about the homeless people among us as the weather gets colder. We work, many of us in the Church, with the Bissell Center and the Hope Mission and so on and look at how they respond to homeless people and we think of that as a justice issue, to provide homes for the homeless people.

And yet, what we find are people who have problems with addiction or mental illness or emotional issues that makes it almost impossible for them to respond to the opportunities that are there. There are people to help with jobs and with housing, but some people are so blocked they can't go there. You can't just say 'Here's some opportunities, just get out there and get yourself a job'. The people at the Bissell Center, at the Hope Mission, what they're about is walking with those people, being with them step by step through a process of recovery, of getting into sheltered employment, of finding protected housing and eventually getting out into the community.

It's a justice issue, but it needs the love of a human presence, people who are there to hear the stories, to cry with the people as they grieve their life, to stay with them and keep forgiving them as they fall and backslide. So the justice and the love are the same thing. Neither one means anything without the other. And it's the holy love that transforms our life and our world. That's the gift that God has given us and we're drawn to it. The spirit leads us into it, not just in an altruistic way, but because by engaging the world with that holy love, we ourselves are blessed, we ourselves are brought alive. We as individuals, as a Church, as a society, as a province, as a nation shrivel up and die if we live without that love, if we fail to bring it to bear on everything in our life.

But as we learn to bring that love, that holy love to bear in every aspect of our life, we ourselves are brought to life. And that is the heart of the promise of the gospel. That is our salvation. So, I invite you to take a moment in silent reflection to be with those thoughts and to see the places where that holy love opportunities emerge in your own life. Amen.