

“The Right Rite”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 31, 2021 – Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 26
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloane Coffin).

In our first reading from Deuteronomy, we are offered some of the most sacred words in Judaism. In the passage is what is called the *Shema*, Hebrew for “hear,” the calling of God for Israel to prioritize their love for YHWH and YHWH alone. By the way, anytime you see the word LORD printed in all caps in our Bible readings, it refers to YHWH, name of God of Israel, which is so sacred in Judaism, that it is never spoken. Rather, whenever it appears in the text, another word *Adonai*, meaning Lord, is spoken. The name of God is the most sacred word in the Jewish tradition, and this passage, the *Shema*, is the most sacred sentence in the Jewish tradition. It is ritually recited during times of worship and reminders of the *shema* are often posted at the doorways of people’s homes and are even worn by some upon their arms or foreheads. Saying them as one’s last words before death is considered a rite of great blessing and living these words, loving God alone, is the greatest source of blessing.

In our gospel lesson, we read of Jesus standing in the presence of religious leaders as they argue about what the greatest source of blessing actually was. Jesus offers his own teaching on the matter, echoing the tradition they shared that loving God alone brought the greatest blessing, but he then coupled the instruction to love God with the instruction for people to love their neighbors, that together they were their greatest commandment.

Those gathered when Jesus spoke certainly could have used this instruction, for they were not filled with love for their neighbor -- not their religious neighbor anyway -- which is why there were there in the first place. They gathered to argue with one another and compete against each other. In Jesus’ day, there were several religious/political groups that not only competed against one another, but actively hated one another. There were the Sadducees, religious

leaders who did not believe in afterlife and emphasized temple rituals; Pharisees, who did believe in afterlife and focused on rituals and rules in local synagogues; Herodians, political zealots who supported the Romans' installed ruling family, the Herods; a group called the Zealots, of whom Jesus' disciple Simon was one, who sought to overthrow the Herods and Roman rule; Essenes, who hated all these other groups and society in general so much, they separated from others and lived in the desert (and left behind in some desert caves the Dead Sea Scrolls); and there were several other religious and political groups all struggling to gain power and to reduce influence of the others. They all loved God, or claimed to love God, but did not love their neighbor so much.

But Jesus coupled love for God with love for neighbor. If you truly love God, you must also love your neighbor, including your religious neighbor and your political neighbor. It was an important lesson for those disputing about what rituals, beliefs, and other traditions really mattered in life. Jesus taught that the right rite was love for God *and* others; all the rest -- all the rituals and beliefs they argued about -- mattered less, so get first things first and love one another.

It was an important lesson then, and it is a lesson that needs to be repeated again and again and again. For throughout history, those of us who are most zealous in our love for God have also often demonstrated that we can be the absolute worst at loving our neighbors.

Today is Reformation Sunday. On this day, the 31st of October, 504 years ago, Catholic Bible scholar and priest Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses, or complaints about practices of the Church, on the university chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany. This bold act of complaint is recognized as a pivotal moment in movements to see the Church change. Complainers before Luther were silenced, often by death, for challenging the authority and power of the Church. Luther's defiant act was a symbol of beginning of new movements, of groups of Christians not just reforming Church, but functioning completely apart from the authority of Rome.

The reaction of the Church to Luther's complaint was not gentle. There was much violence between supporters of Roman Catholic Church and breakaway groups following Luther, groups known as Evangelicals, later called Protestants. And there was much violence not only between them and Catholics and between

those among them who followed Luther and those who followed others, such as Jean Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. After Zwingli died in battle, fighting against an army of Catholic rivals, Luther stated: "They say that Zwingli recently died thus; if his error had prevailed, we would have perished, and our church with us. It was a judgment of God. That was always a proud people. The others, the papists, will probably also be dealt with by our Lord God." There was no neighborly love between the churches of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Rome. They were religious neighbors that did not peacefully co-exist.

Over the course of the last century, there has been a movement for these different groups to find ways to love one another, to maintain our unique traditions, but to find and stand on common ground when we can. Our own denomination, the UCC, is the product of this movement of churches to find ways to love the religious neighbor. Formed in 1957 from union of two denominations that were themselves previously formed by unions of other denominations, we are a hodgepodge of New England Congregationalists; Christians, similarly autonomous churches scattered throughout Appalachia and the South; Evangelicals, in the German style of Luther; and Reformed, in the style of Luther's Swiss rivals Zwingli and Calvin. Out of these very different churches, we have formed one united church.

And we are a uniting church, working where we can to bring others together to stand with us in demonstrating God's love for the world. Here in this congregation of the UCC, our Community Dinner is one wonderful local example of how we work to pull people from different religious traditions together for the sake of sharing God's love.

Unfortunately, there are still many Christians who do not practice such a neighbor-loving tradition. I was reading earlier this week about one such religious group in Kansas that is notorious not for neighbor-loving, but neighbor-hating. Dave Grohl, singer and guitarist for the band Foo Fighters, who just last night were inducted to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, noted in an interview with Vulture.com how this religious group from Kansas pickets the Foo Fighters' shows whenever they're in the Kansas City area after the Foo Fighters' produced a very silly music video that the religious group didn't like. And so they picket and shout words of hate. The band's response has been to assemble on a flatbed trailer in

front of the haters and to perform Bee Gees songs for them as they picket. In the edited-for-church words of Dave Grohl: “[As we play, they shout,] ‘Dave Grohl, you’re going to burn in...hell,’ and they...mean it. It’s like, Wow. I’m just standing up there playing a Bee Gees song. That’s real hate.” Indeed, that’s real hate.

This is an extreme example of religious haters, but there are too many other examples of how those of us who claim to be followers of Christ practice too much hate for our neighbor and not enough love for our neighbor. We are not called to hate or to fear others, but to love them. We are called to love our religious neighbors, our political neighbors, our geographic neighbors, our next door neighbors.

And our acts of love are what really matters. One act of love -- one act -- is more valuable than performing 1,000 other religious rituals. Love is always the right rite. So let us love God, who is one, and love our neighbor, with whom we are one. Amen.