

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 4/26/20

Last week we talked about how a major part of the biblical understanding of righteousness is economic and social justice for those in need. I am trying to show how the Law, which has been so denigrated and abused by Christian theology, provides a necessary and vital foundation for understanding Jesus' teaching and ministry, as well as the rest of the New Testament. Nowhere is this more critically important than in Torah's teaching on economic justice. It is not coincidental that precisely in a parable about a rich man who goes to hell for ignoring the beggar at his gate, Jesus insists that all you need to know about salvation is to be found in Torah and the Prophets, and that those who don't listen to them will not listen to him either (Luke 16:31). I am arguing in this course that the church has created an image of Jesus that does not take into account the Law and the Prophets, and that therefore can't understand what Jesus has to say.

The main reason this material on economic justice is so challenging to us is that it has not been presented to us as an essential part of what it means to be a Christian, not just an optional add-on at some later date for those who are interested. If we were to have grown up in a Christian community where any discussion of salvation, being born again, accepting Jesus into your heart, having a personal relationship with God, etc. included a discussion of these issues as part of what those words mean, we would have been thinking about all this since we were very young. When I was in college and seminary, there was a very popular book called *Knowing God*, by J. I. Packer. It has won all sorts of awards, including being named by *Christianity Today* as one of the top 50 books that have shaped evangelical Christians. Yet nowhere in that book does the author mention Jeremiah 22:16. I am trying to rectify that fundamental failure of evangelical Christianity to be truly biblical by taking us back to the Law and the Prophets.

H. The Problem with "Love Your Neighbor As Yourself"

Like the New Testament, the Talmud contains discussions among the ancient rabbis of what constitutes the heart of Torah, the central principle or commandment that is the foundation for all else. That discussion was going on in Jesus' day and would continue. The Talmud records a well-known story

about the great first century rabbi Hillel, who died in Jerusalem when Jesus was a teenager (10 AD). A Gentile came to him and said he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the whole of Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel responded: “What is hateful to you, do not do to another; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” (*Shabbat* 31a).

Much has been made of this summary of the teachings of Torah, especially its similarity to the so-called “Golden Rule” of Jesus. Jesus’ version of this ancient principle is stated positively: do to others what you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12). Interestingly, neither of these rabbis is saying anything particularly original. Two hundred years before Hillel, the Jewish book of Tobit (in the Apocrypha) says, “What you hate, do not do to another” (Tobit 4:15). Versions of this saying are found in ancient Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman, and Indian teachers as well. It is not unique to Judaism or Christianity.

A century after Hillel, the equally influential Rabbi Akiva called the command in Lev. 19:18 to love your neighbor “a great principle of Torah.” Akiva’s statement is usually understood to have been a continuation of Hillel’s teaching, and both ideas have been a fundamental part of Judaism, even though most people think of these commandments as uniquely Christian. But as we have seen, Jesus is not teaching anything new. He is simply demonstrating that his own teaching is firmly rooted in Torah and the Prophets, and affirming their central authority for his disciples. Jesus is in perfect agreement with Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Akiva about the essence of Torah.

But because Christianity very early on cut itself off from its roots in Judaism, the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” no longer was a starting point for the exploration and understanding of Torah and the Prophets and their continued importance for our lives, as it is for Jesus (Matt. 7:12; 22:40). Rather, it was seen as a replacement for them. So Christians lost the robust grounding of this commandment in the specifics of everyday life that are contained in Torah and the Prophets, such as the practical economic justice we have been discussing. Instead, the command to love your neighbor has often been reduced to a vague sense of being nice to other people.

The problem here is that it is not at all clear what Lev. 19:18 means, especially when the phrase “love your neighbor as yourself” is isolated from its context in Torah. Several questions arise. Who is my neighbor (a question raised in the New Testament)? What does love actually look like in everyday life? And perhaps the most difficult question: what does “as yourself” mean?

Many suggestions have been offered to this last question: Love your neighbor

- a. as much as you love yourself

- b. in the same way that you love yourself
- c. love (the good) for your neighbor as you love (the good) for yourself
- d. as someone who is like yourself

The first two are usually what most people come up with. The third is defended by some scholars on the basis of the Hebrew grammar. This understanding could also be phrased, “Love your neighbor’s well-being as if it were your own.” The fourth option looks to the repetition of this sentence in v. 34, which speaks of loving the foreigner, who although on the surface may be different from you, in fact is a human being just like yourself. For reasons I will explain, I think c. and d. are better, because they focus on the other person, the recipient of the love. The first two options tend to shift that focus to the one doing the loving, to myself.

The first two options for me raise the problem I have with what some Christians do with this verse. I have heard countless sermons and Bible studies saying that the Bible teaches here that you have to love yourself, that this verse really is about self-love. You have to love yourself before you can love others. That simply is not true. One can act in a loving way towards others no matter what you may feel about them or about yourself. In fact I would argue that focusing on others and their needs can be the starting point for healing for those who are feeling bad about themselves.

My problem with both the Golden Rule and this verse (isolated from its context) is that they tend to make our selves and our own subjectivity the starting point for how we treat others. Especially because of the individualism of our Western society, the self, our personal feelings and attitudes and desires, becomes the measure of all things. Only in our narcissistic, self-absorbed culture can a Bible verse about loving others be turned into self-help advice!

This is far from a biblical perspective. The Bible is not worried about encouraging people to love themselves. When the Bible wants us to feel good about ourselves, it does not tell us to love ourselves more. It tells us how much God loves us. The Bible assumes that people will have some sort of basic self-interest and concern for their own welfare, but wants to encourage us to be concerned for the needs of others, to stop thinking about ourselves for a minute and focus our attention on the world around us.

That is why I think the Talmud records an interesting response to Rabbi Akiva. A student, Simeon ben Azzai, objects, arguing that there is a greater principle in Torah than loving your neighbor as yourself—Genesis 5:1, that humans are created in God’s image (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 30b). I have always been fascinated by this discussion because I think ben Azzai’s point is

well taken. Underlying the command to love others is the fundamental truth that they are made in God's image. Ben Azzai, I think, wants to ground our relationship to others in something more objective and reliable than our own human emotion.

A later rabbinic commentary (ca. 500 AD) elaborates on Ben Azzai's response: "Rabbi Tanchuma said, Thus, one should not say, 'Since I am scorned, I should scorn my fellow as well; since I have been cursed, I will curse my fellow as well.' Rabbi Tanchumah said, if you act thus, realize who it is that you are willing to have humiliated – 'the one who was made in the likeness of God.' Rabbi Tanchuma says, If you do so, you should know who are you scorning — 'in the likeness of God He created him'" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 24:7). Those who are feeling mistreated and abused, or whose self-esteem is low, may delight in bringing down others. We need something outside ourselves as the basis for love. These rabbis are arguing that the foundation for loving others is the objective reality of the divine image in others. To mistreat another human, created in God's image, is to mistreat God himself.

A first century Jewish Christian argued the same point. You cannot bless God and curse those made in God's image (James 3:9-10). Another first century Jewish Christian agrees. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). If you don't see God's image in others, perhaps blinded by anger or resentment or prejudice, you will not be able to love God or your neighbor.

Indeed, that is precisely the often overlooked context of the command in Leviticus 19:17-18 to love your neighbor—a situation in which we are angry or resentful against our neighbor because of something they have done to us. It is just in such difficult circumstances that we are told not to hate or bear a grudge or seek revenge, but to act in love, which includes speaking frankly to the person about what they have done. This passage is carefully balanced with alternating negative and positive commands. Notice that the parallel to the more general command to love your neighbor is the command to admonish the neighbor for his hurtful behavior. Love does not mean ignoring the wrongs others have committed.

Now we certainly don't always admonish ourselves for our mistreatment of others. And we certainly don't relish the thought of others bringing our lack of love out into the open. So if loving others the way we love ourselves is the measure of how we behave, we would not do what this passage tells us to do.

A 12th century French biblical scholar, Joseph Bekhor Shor, rightly asks: How does God expect one who has been wronged to the point of wanting to take revenge to turn around and love that person? He finds the answer in the overlooked final clause in verse 18: “I (am) YHWH” (a phrase which functions kind of like the billboard in the slide—“This is me, God, talking. Pay attention.”). Bekhor Shor interprets this as God saying, “Let your love for me overcome your hatred for him and keep you from taking revenge, and as a result peace will come between you.” So again our love for God, not our own confused sense of self-love, should be what informs our relationships with others, who are created in God’s image.

Another midrash on this verse develops the issue even further. “What is an example? Someone was cutting meat and cut his hand with the knife. Would he in turn cut the other hand?” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 30b). Responding in kind, hurting as you have been hurt, ultimately is to hurt yourself. I hear that same message in the underlying ambiguity of what R. Tanchuma said. Mistreating “the one who was made in the likeness of God” obviously refers to the person you are hurting. But you also are made in the likeness of God, and so you are indeed mistreating yourself as well.

In several places, the Talmud argues that God created one human being first in order to teach that “whoever destroys one human being, it is as if they had destroyed a whole world, and whoever saves one life it is considered as if they had saved a whole world” (*Sanhedrin* 37a). Our actions towards others, good or bad, have a kind of ripple effect that goes beyond the immediate circumstances and spreads out into the larger world. The rabbis, along with Paul the Pharisee, affirm that we are all intimately connected to one another and if one of us is hurt, we all are hurt (“If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with them; if one member is honored, all rejoice with them.” 1 Cor. 12:26). And rabbi Jesus told his disciples that in loving (or neglecting) the needy, they were loving (or neglecting) him (Matt. 25:34-45). We are all connected, as we are finding out quite clearly these days, and our actions may literally affect the whole world and ultimately come back to hurt ourselves as well.

So R. Ben Azzai’s insistence on the fundamental importance of the idea that we are created in God’s image I think is justified. Our self-esteem, our love for ourselves, is based not on how we subjectively view ourselves—on what family we were born in or on what we have accomplished or on what we have, but rather on the fact that we bear the very image of God, that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

So also the love we are to show for others is not based on our own feelings or sense of self-worth or on how we love ourselves, but on who they are as

persons who bear the very image of God. Love asks us to look to their needs, to their well-being, not our own. Again, the New Testament argues the same point: “If one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need yet closes his heart toward them, how can the love of God be in you?” (1 John 3:17). Our love for others is founded on our love for God and for the image of God that they bear.