

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE
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Sunday, August 31, 2008

Title: Love of Neighbor/Love of Self

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and 10:19, Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22: 34-40

Theme: A calling in this day for radical spiritual unity, for mutuality between self-desires and the desires of the community that nurture us.

[Rabbi Booth-Nadav gives his apology. However, the flu-like symptoms that he is fighting yesterday and this morning simply are not allowing him the opportunity to be with us in worship. As well, he figured that you might appreciate that he was not spreading his infection. We will re-schedule for some other time this fall, perhaps around Thanksgiving.]

The theme that Rabbi Booth-Nadav and I spoke of for this morning is unity, a radical unity among our faith traditions, a radical unity between the children of God. This does not mean that we cease to be Christian any more than a Jew is to cease being a Jew. But it does mean that we feed each other. We bless each other. Within this unity, we are to seek a balance of mutuality between our self-desires and the desires of the community that nurture us. Let me then pick up for both of us the values that we wished to affirm this morning. Though I will now do so in a way that is different from Rabbi Booth-Nadav had he spoken here.

Within my Friday email out to the congregation, I suggested that last week having Imam Ali of the Northeast Denver African-American Mosque and the plans this Sunday to have a rabbi speak were a unique opportunity for our congregation to take a leadership role in the interfaith dynamics of Denver. I even went further by saying that I am convinced that Christianity is on the cusp of a Second Reformation. Within the First Reformation [beginning 500 years ago], the faithful began to witness that there were multiple ways to worship God within the umbrella of Christianity. Even though the various camps

would war with each other and pass judgment on each other and even at times kill each other, what became self-evident was that there were indeed multiple ways to worship God as Christians. In this Second Reformation, which has just begun in earnest within the last ten to twenty years, as faithful Christians, we are beginning to experience that there are indeed faithful ways for God to be worshipped outside the umbrella of Christianity. Even though we struggle with other faiths, even though we continue to fall to the arrogance of elitism, [i.e., “Christians are more loved by God”] what has become all too clear is that there are indeed multiple ways to worship God among the various world religions. And even as we observe this interfaith movement and support its development, we do so as clear and passionate Christians.

Among other Christians, among even some of my United Methodist colleagues, and I am fairly certain even among some of you, who are so supportive of me and the ministry of this church, is the unspoken and sometimes spoken challenge: “Paul, how can you believe such a thing and still be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ?” What comes to mind are passages such as “No one comes to the Father but through me.” [John 14:6] or “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son... [John 3.16] or the Apostle Paul’s theology of Atonement, the saving act of Jesus’ sacrifice.

While it is tempting to go through the scriptures and seek to give answer to each of these challenging passages, I want to do something that at first seems to be completely off base. But

perhaps it will help us with a critical insight. I want to talk about slavery in the 1800s. You see, for 1800 years, it was believed that the scriptures justified slavery. In fact, in the 1800s in the United States, as slavery began to be challenged in the academic and civic communities, the Church as an institution predominately was a strong supporter of slavery – why? Because faithful people have been raised to believe that the Scriptures supported the existence of slavery. They were raised to read the Scriptures in such a way that they saw references to slavery throughout the Old and New Testaments. To give you two quick examples: The Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male slave or your female slave.” [Ex. 20: 8] Good faithful people read in the Ten Commandments an acceptance of the institution of slavery. Or in Paul’s Epistle to Philemon in which he is sending a slave back to his master, “so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave...” [Philemon 1:10-16] Onesimus is to go back and enslave himself to his former master in the name of Jesus Christ to witness that he was free in Christ even though he was enslaved.

The point of these two examples [and we would find this to be true with numerous other passages] it that they seem rather insignificant to us today. Yet let us not forget how these insignificant passages were given greater emphasis to justify the institution of slavery. Often we see in the Scriptures that which we are taught by our community to see. The value of Scripture that even under the most repressive of authority, the Spirit of God has a way of breaking through some of the most self-deluding mirrors. There is not a one of us here this day that would seek to justify the existence of slavery.

I would argue this morning that we have been taught within our Christian communities that the Scriptures are clear: one must be a Christian or one cannot be saved. One must be baptized or one cannot get into heaven. I would argue that just as a Reformation moved the Church 500 years ago and just as the major institution of slavery within our society was finally challenged and defeated 250 years. I would argue that such is the beginning demise of the false position of Christian Triumphalism [i.e., the supposed superiority of Christianity].

I would argue that while there are selected passages that appear to be a stumbling block, there are far more passages that affirm the radical spiritual unity as sons and daughters of God. I would further argue that it was never the intent of Jesus as he taught within the gospels to have people worship him. Rather a critical examination of his teachings is that he was seeking to rekindle people’s relationship with God – a God with whom one can have an intimate relationship, a God of Righteousness who cared for the meek and the lost, and a God of Justice who was willing to confront those who abused their positions of affluence and authority. I would suggest to those who have not read them, two biblical scholars that further develop this awareness are Marcus Borg and the Catholic priest, Father Richard Rohr. Let me turn to the passage that many claim to be the core of Jesus’ teaching, Matthew 22:

And one of them asked him, to test him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to them, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest command. And a second is unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” [Matthew 22: 34-40]

Notice how there is no induction to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Master. We find this also when we read of the Final Judgment, “Lord when did we see you hungry and give you food or thirsty and give you drink...” And he answered them, “When you did it unto the least of these...” [Matthew 25: 31-46] There is no criterion to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. What is being affirmed as the commandments of God is to love God, to love neighbor, and to love self. Period.

Yet we must go further. How often have we heard it said, “Yes, but the superiority of Christianity is that it is grounded in love and the Old Testament is grounded in judgment and violence.”

I would have us now turn our focus to the readings from Deuteronomy. In Chapter Six, we read a passage that is so well known to the Jews that they have given this passage a name. It is called the Shema. Every Jew knows this passage by memory. The translations vary but as Christians we read, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. God is one God.” [Deuteronomy 6: 4] And as part of this Shema is the commandment that Jesus declared, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your might.” You see, Jesus was not giving a Christian commandment. He was giving a commandment that had been in place for a thousand years.

In Leviticus 19:18, we find the second part of Jesus’ proclamation: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Throughout the Hebrew scriptures is a strong theology of hospitality: of reaching out to those whom you do not know and offering them nurture. I would suggest that in this Second Reformation of our faith, the theology of hospitality becomes much more central to our teachings than the theology of atonement, of Jesus’ death for the sake of our

sins. Now hear me, I am not dismissing atonement – for many this is a powerful, redeeming belief. What I am suggesting is that we place it in its right order. Foremost, by the very words of Jesus’ teaching is the theology of hospitality, of reaching out and offering nurture to our neighbor as well as nurture to ourselves.

I close now by referring back to Deuteronomy. In Chapter 10, verse 19 we read a radical induction. “You shall love the stranger....” Not you shall tolerate the stranger. But love the stranger. Why? Because you were once strangers in a strange land.

There is not a one of us here that does not know the devastating affects of being alone, of feeling that you carry a weight on your shoulders far greater that you can bear. As children of faith, we affirm a God who is indeed present to us. We affirm the power of prayer that reaches across the barriers of distance. We affirm a faith that declares a love of our brothers and sisters. And somehow, we are able to continue the journey, no matter how difficult.

As children of faith, all faiths, we are called to be a bridge of support and nurture for one another. Not just tolerate our differences but open ourselves up so that we can be a blessing to each.

Rabbi Booth-Nadav told me that there is a tradition within his worship when they read this passage from their prayer book which we have printed in the Unison Prayer, that they turn to a neighbor and repeat, “You shall love your fellow human being as yourself.”

It is in this spirit, that I would invite you to turn to the person next to you and say: You shall love your fellow human being as yourself.

By this merit may we truly open ourselves to the human community in prayer. Amen.