



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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MARCH 11, 2018  
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

## What Do We Love More Than Our Neighbor? Leviticus 19:1-18; Luke 10:25-37

Like a weird twist on the game show Jeopardy®, Jesus and the lawyer answer one another's questions with questions of their own. The lawyer questioned Jesus who questioned him back. The lawyer answered him and asked another question and Jesus answered the lawyer and asked him another question. The lawyer answered and Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" or, in other words, "You just answered your own question. Inherit life by loving God with your entire personality and love your neighbor by being a good neighbor."

Jesus was wise and practical to first direct the lawyer's question to his source of authority which was the Law. The law or Torah consists of the first five books of the Bible and contain not only God's guidelines for right living which we know as the Ten Commandments but also the hundreds of other laws which were added by the priests to deal specifically with daily matters. When the lawyer asked about the route to eternal life, Jesus asked him what answer he had already found in the law. The man answered with two quotes: one from Deuteronomy which tells us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and another from Leviticus which adds that second component: love your neighbor as you love yourself.

I don't know how many of you have ever read through the book of Leviticus, but all of us are familiar with certain verses and passages. Leviticus is not a book to be read by the squeamish or faint of heart. Cameron Howard, Professor of Old Testament, has said of this writing, "The book of Leviticus is a minefield full of topics that nobody wants to talk about in church: animal sacrifice, blood-sprinkling, moldy walls, oozing sores, gashed flesh, 'a swelling or an eruption or a spot' (Leviticus 14:56), and bodily emissions of any kind."<sup>1</sup> As our grandmothers would say, it's not proper conversation for polite company.

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<sup>1</sup>Cameron B.R. Howard, "Commentary on Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18," *Working Preacher* (February 19, 2017); available online at: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3165](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3165).

At its core, however, Leviticus has to do with holiness—the holiness of God. We are supposed to honor the holiness of God and we are also to strive for holiness ourselves, not in order to be like God, but because God is holy and we are created in God’s image.<sup>2</sup> Because humans and human lives and human bodies are messy business, we can pollute the sanctuary which represents where God is. So Leviticus deals with all of the messy issues of life which people at the time thought might interfere with the holiness of God.

They did understand one thing, however, and that is that the holiness to which we are called is not limited to the sanctuary of God; it extends to the people and the land—the community as a whole. God’s invitation to holiness is not reserved for worship alone; rather, holiness has to do with how we behave and how we act toward one another—how we live. Holiness is not a sanitized state of being in which we walk around with a glowing face and a halo over our head. Holiness is living as God wants us to live. For that reason, the writer of Leviticus spoke not only of keeping sabbath and not making images of God, but of sharing the harvest with the poor, dealing honestly with one another, and treating workers fairly. As much as it has to do with our relationship with God, holiness also involves our relationships with one another. For that reason, Leviticus calls us to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourself.

The lawyer understood these things. Yet, I think there is at least one more question that should have been asked by the lawyer or Jesus or someone in the crowd, perhaps someone in this crowd. After hearing the guidance of Leviticus and the soul searching of the lawyer who affirmed that we are to love God and our neighbor as ourself, the next question is, “What do we love more than our neighbors?” Looking around our world, it is rather clear that humanity as a whole is not operating on the principle of loving our neighbor. Even those of us who strive to live as God calls us do not always love our neighbor. Why do we not show mercy to everyone? Why do we not treat one another as holy since we are all created by God? What is it that we love more than our neighbor?

The Samaritan was identified as the neighbor in Jesus’ story because he was the one who stopped to help the man who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. He risked his life to help because he could have been walking into a trap. He had to shell out some of his hard earned money because he paid the innkeeper to take care of the man until he could travel

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<sup>2</sup>“Leviticus 19: Becoming Holy Because God Is Holy,” *Taizé* (October 2012); available online at: [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article167.html?date=2012-10-01](http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2012-10-01).

on his own. He risked all kinds of scrutiny because he was a despised Samaritan to the Jews. He was considered a “half-breed,” an apostate, and a prodigal cousin who was outside the fold of the pure Jewish nation. He obviously put aside some of the things he loved in order to help the wounded man.

Safety is one of the things we think a lot about today. We are worried about the safety of our homes. A house in my neighborhood (where some of you also live) was broken into last week. Now we all feel vulnerable. We worry about the safety of our children and are struggling to figure out how to make our schools safe without creating a prison-like atmosphere. We worry about the safety of our churches so we are developing plans in case of an emergency and locking our doors and doing all that we can to make certain you can feel safe when you are at church.

Sometimes, however, instead of preventing violence, our fears push us into violence. Last week we were horrified by the video of an Asheville policeman beating a man who stopped for jaywalking but who would not follow police directions. We have seen video of the shooting of a man who was trying to explain to an officer that he legally had a gun in the car. We have seen video of a man shot to death while running away from police but without a weapon of any kind. In those instances, what did the officers love more than the people whom they were supposed to be serving? Was it their own safety? We can understand that. Was it their prejudices or sense of power or frustration over how badly things had gone at home that morning? We will never know. In each case, however, there was something that the officer, right or wrong, loved more than his neighbor for whom he was hired to enforce the law but also to serve and protect.

Sometimes our fears push us into selfishness. We work hard for what we have and do not appreciate people who get goods and services for free when we have to pay for them. We do what we can to stay healthy and out of trouble and we do not appreciate people who do not take care of themselves and make poor choices and engage in risky behavior that we have to pay for. We may see some of our opportunities slipping away or our power and influence fading as the makeup of our population changes and ethnic and racial groups different from us begin to make decisions for us. We may be unhappy because our political party is not in power and we do not like the other party or we may feel vengeful because our political party is in power and it is our chance to drive the bus of government for a while. If any of these

things or other reasons are true, do they explain why we may not love our neighbors as ourselves?

Walter Brueggemann has written and spoken a great deal about our perspectives on abundance and scarcity. He points to the story of Joseph the son of Jacob who became Pharaoh's right hand man and prepared Egypt for famine by stockpiling grain and goods during boom years. During the famine, however, when they had stored enough food for everyone, Pharaoh took advantage of the people by requiring that they exchange their money, their valuables, and their land for the food they had helped stockpile. He used the threat of scarcity to take advantage of the people. God, on the other hand, always deals in abundance. In fact, the story is told in such a way as to suggest that everything that happened to Joseph put him in a position to help the people of Egypt—and his own people—avoid the tragedy of famine. God's story is all about abundance—the abundance of the garden, the abundance of life saved from the flood, the abundance of the children of Israel, the abundance of life brought by Jesus Christ. With God there is no scarcity at all!

Unfortunately, says Brueggemann, we forget. We forget

God's miracle of generosity. And we start imagining that there is a scarcity of food, of love, of life. And driven by scarcity, we scramble to get ours and more and more, climbing over and through and upon our neighbors to get ours . . . The poor scramble with robbery and violence and threat. The powerful scramble with investments and tax advantages and credit and exploitation. And together the rich and the poor create a jungle of anxiety, brutality, and violence.<sup>3</sup>

In his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky has the character Grushenka recount a fairy told she often heard as a child. I think it speaks well to our problem:

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God; 'she once

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<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope: Walter Brueggemann*, Compiled by Richard Floyd (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 5.

pulled up an onion in her garden,' said he, 'and gave it to a beggar woman.' God answered: 'You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.' The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her; 'Come,' said he, 'catch hold and I'll pull you out.' And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. 'I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours.' As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake . . . So the angel wept and went away.<sup>4</sup>

The point of the parable is that the onion would have been strong enough to pull everyone out of eternal suffering, but the woman's own selfishness caused more suffering for them all. The problem lies in how we think, says Brueggemann: "Commodity thinking says that you share with your neighbor stuff that you can afford. Covenantal thinking says that you share first with your neighbor, and then you and your neighbor live on what you've got together."<sup>5</sup> Although the woman was given an opportunity to be freed from suffering, she loved herself more than sharing that good gift with others. In her heart, she could not afford to share her blessing with her fellow sufferers.

I seriously doubt that the Samaritan could *afford* to stop and help the man clinging to life in a ditch and then pay for his care at an inn. The priest and the Levite who passed by obviously determined that they could not afford to stop. While his views on religion differed from those of a traditional Jew, the Samaritan still read the same holy scriptures and he knew that God invited Father Abraham into a covenant relationship. He knew that the covenant required him to love God and his neighbor as himself. He could not afford to stop and help, but, as a faithful child of God, he couldn't afford not to help.

Another Russian tale helps to illustrate why the Samaritan had to afford to help:

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<sup>4</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Constance Garnett, translator (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1995), 328.

<sup>5</sup>Brueggemann, 2.

An old man planted a turnip. The turnip grew to be enormous. The old man started to pull the turnip out of the ground. He pulled and pulled, but couldn't pull it out. So he called the old woman over.

The old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip, they pulled and pulled, but couldn't pull it out. So the old woman called the granddaughter over.

The granddaughter took hold of the old woman, the old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip, they pulled and pulled, but couldn't pull it out. So the granddaughter called the dog over.

The dog took hold of the granddaughter, the granddaughter took hold of the old woman, the old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip, they pulled and pulled, but couldn't pull it out. So the dog called the cat over.

The cat took hold of the dog, the dog took hold of the granddaughter, the granddaughter took hold of the old woman, the old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip, they pulled and pulled, but couldn't pull it out. So the cat called the mouse over.

The mouse took hold of the cat, the cat took hold of the dog, the dog took hold of the granddaughter, the granddaughter took hold of the old woman, the old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip, they pulled and pulled—and finally pulled out the turnip!<sup>6</sup>

We have some serious problems in our world which we cannot solve alone. Together, however, we can do amazing things. Putting aside some of the things that really are not more important than what we need to accomplish together, we can solve our problems and help one another.

Proverbs 27:19 reads: “As in water face answers to face, so the heart of one to another.” Commenting on this strange verse, a rabbi asked, “Why does the verse speak of water rather than a mirror?” His answer: “We see

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<sup>6</sup>Russian Turnip Tale, available online at: <https://russian-crafts.com/russian-folk-tales/turnip.html>.

our reflection in water only when we bend close to it; so, too, your heart must lean down to another's; then it will see itself in the other's heart."<sup>7</sup>

If the heart is the true sanctuary where we meet God, then we are back where we started with our calling to be holy because God is holy. If we are to love God and our neighbor, even to love God by loving our neighbor, we must begin by letting the heart lead. We must honestly ask ourselves, "What do we love more than our neighbor?" Perhaps one day the answer for all of us will be, "God alone." Amen.

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<sup>7</sup>Chasidic Saying, *Day by Day—Reflections on the Themes of the Torah from Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought*, Rabbi Chaim Stern, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 325.

March 11, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God who created and redeemed us and who continues to sustain us by your loving grace, we come with hearts filled with gratitude for the countless ways that you have blessed us. We thank you for the beauty of your creation. For lengthening days and the first hints of budding plants, for the warmth of sunshine and the refreshment of spring showers, for every creature great and small which sings your praise, we offer our thanks. We stand in awe as we consider the beauty and wonder and variety of your earth and all that is in it. We also give you thanks for the beauty and variety of people around us. In your loving creativity and infinite imagination, you have made each of us unique and uniquely gifted, and yet each of us is created in your image and enlivened with the breath of your Spirit. We are grateful that in your wisdom you have made the world and humanity in such diversity and splendor, such majesty and beauty.

But we confess, O Lord, that sometimes we are frightened by our differences. We admit that we don't always know how to respond to those whose language or customs or opinions or abilities seem so different from our own. And so we build walls to separate us from them and to protect ourselves from the challenges of cooperation and change. When in our ignorance, fear, or apathy we forget that all people are made in your image, help us to tear down the walls that limit our vision and divide our human family. Teach us to build bridges of understanding and compassion. Inspire us to reach out beyond these walls, beyond ourselves, to those in our family and neighborhood, in our city and our world, who are forgotten or lonely, who are poor and hungry, who suffer because of violence or persecution or pain. Make of us a people after your own heart, a people who love the unlovable, who welcome the outcast, who offer healing and hope wherever there is pain and despair.

In the remaining days of our Lenten journey, let us look deep, Merciful God, to discover those barriers within our own hearts which hinder true community with one another and with you. And help us to be intentional to demonstrate kindness, humility, and compassion toward those we encounter, and strive for justice and peace for your children everywhere. Keep ever before us the example of Christ, who came to love and to serve and to give of himself for the sake of others, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

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