

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
 Sunday, September 7, 2020 (14 Pentecost, Proper 18-A)
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Ezekiel 33:7-11. Psalm 119:33-40. Romans 13:8-14. Matthew 18:15-20

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As I've reflected on conversations I've had over the past few weeks, almost every person I've listened to has talked about their fears and anxieties about Covid and isolation, work and schooling challenges, the volatile partisan divisions and the economic uncertainties of our country. Today's Scripture readings are filled with insights for how God grounds us and calls us to live amid the uncertainties and anxieties of this season of our lives.

In the reading from Romans, St Paul grounds us in the core teaching of Jesus. He says, all the commandments "are summed up in this word: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to the neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of God's law...put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for greedy self-centeredness.'"

While we all are experiencing many changes, many losses, many unknowns, Paul says we can find our stable anchoring reality by constantly focusing on loving our neighbors, regardless of what people are saying and doing around us. Yes, there are many distractions, many things that drain our energy. But as we begin every day, we can ask God to show us how to love all the neighbors we come in contact with in the coming day. At the end of each day, we can ask, what opportunities did I have to love my neighbors today?

Regardless of how long Covid and economic uncertainties interrupt our lives, regardless of how the political future of this country unfolds, we followers of Jesus will continue to make the focus of our lives the love of all our neighbors. The God we serve, the God who created and sustains the universe is Love and Love is our unchanging priority and grounding principle.

As we celebrate the Season of Creation, we are reminded that the planet, the cosmos, all the animals, all living things are our neighbors. God created all us creatures in love and called us to live together with mutual love and interdependence. We all know about the vulnerabilities of our planet. I hope that each of us will intentionally look for little ways in which we can demonstrate our caring for God's earth and animals in this Creation Season. I hope we can publish on Trinity's website a list of little things we can do to help renew God's creation. Each of us can be part of the work of renewing God's world.

I find that as I enjoy God's creation by walking in the woods and paying attention to the sky, the birds and flowers, the flowing Connecticut river, God actually renews me. Through Creation God gives me refreshment amid all that drains life from me at this season. God invites us all to enjoy and care for the renewing gift of God's Creation as part of loving our neighbors.

God also invites us to remember that loving our neighbors involves loving every person on the planet. God created each person out of love. They are all our sisters and brothers. So as we watch the global news, we can lovingly pray for our global neighbors, especially the people and nations we are connected to through our parish mission giving, asking God to care for their well-being amidst all the challenges people face around the world.

Jesus is very clear that loving neighbors also involves loving our enemies. As followers of Jesus, we struggle together to learn how to love and pray for people who speak and act like enemies of God's priority of loving all our neighbors. Jesus gives us the demanding work of going deeper than our natural hostilities and finding in Christ a way to pray for and care about people who work against what we understand to be God's priorities, as Christ loved and forgave people who unjustly condemned and crucified him.

As we learn pray for enemies of love, today's reading from Ezekiel reminds us that part of love for neighbors and enemies involves speaking up about what is contrary to God's moral values and commandments. The prophet Ezekiel hears a word from God while the people of Israel are living in exile in Babylon because they have not kept their focus on loving God and loving their neighbors, especially the poor among them. God says to Ezekiel, I have made you a sentinel for the nation of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me...if you do not speak, I will hold you accountable for your silence. If you do speak, they will be responsible for their response. This is what I want you to tell the people: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live? God says, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?"

God has two messages for Ezekiel that connect with our current situation. First, God expects Ezekiel and us to speak up as sentinels. When we see things that are not consistent with the moral law of God, when we see ways in which our nation is not loving all our neighbors, we are responsible, each in our own way to speak up about what we see as wrong.

The second message is: God does not want this or any nation to be destroyed. God weeps at our struggles and injustices. God's message is: you are experiencing all your problems because you have forgotten to make love for God and all your neighbors the heart of your values, relationships, laws and policies in your country. I want you as a nation to listen deeply to the pain of your neighbors and change your ways, change your laws and policies, change the violent words and actions that are contrary to the mutual love and respect God created you to practice as children of God on this planet. Change your ways so that you can live and not destroy yourselves, your nation and the world.

This is how God called Ezekiel to speak and act in his challenging situation. In the Old Testament book of Micah, we see another helpful example of how God called a person to respond in a tumultuous time. Micah asked God what he was to do. God answered: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8). We can tape this verse on our refrigerator, so we see it often each day. This is a clear statement of what God requires of us in this tumultuous time. We are to be sentinels for God's justice, with kindness and humility and love for all our neighbors.

While these Scripture passages are clarifying and helpful, they also leave me feeling a bit heavy and challenged. Notice how God also has an encouraging and uplifting word for us in today's Scriptures.

In Romans, Paul, with Jesus, reminded us to love our neighbors **as we love ourselves**. This is a clear invitation from God for us to stop and ask, how might Jesus be calling us to love, care for and renew our bodies, minds and spirits during this draining time.

Let me suggest three ways Jesus loved and cared for himself during the threatening stresses of his life.

First, Jesus took time to pray, to bring all his stresses, fears and anxieties to his Father in Heaven. How might God be inviting you to spend more time in prayer, meditation, reflection on scriptures, listening to renewing music, drawing strength and healing from God's magnificent creation? We can breathe in God's healing peace and breathe out our anxieties and fears.

Second, when Jesus experienced difficult situations, he took time to talk with his friends, imperfect as his disciples were. While we feel the pain of not being able to be together in our normal patterns of worship and Eucharist, coffee hours and bible studies, we can all take initiative to make phone calls to talk with people about the concerns we are feeling as we live through these tumultuous times. Who could you talk with this week to help calm and renew your spirit?

And a final spiritual practice Jesus used for his renewal was finding intentional and spontaneous ways, every day, to reach out to others in need. As the prayer of St Francis says, "in giving we receive." God created us to be renewed as we love our neighbors. It might be something as simple as smiling or sharing a kind word with people we see in stores or as we walk. It might be phoning, sending an email, note or card to someone who comes to our minds. Small acts of kindness and love shown toward others helps to renew us and keep us grounded in the Love for God and Neighbor for which God created us.

Today's Scriptures leave us with three assignments for reflection and action. I invite you to close your eyes and talk with God about your responses to these questions:

How might God be inviting you to practice loving God and your neighbors in specific ways this week?

How might God be calling you to be a sentinel, to humbly speak about ways you see our nation not acting with love for all our neighbors?

How might God be calling you this week, to love and care for yourself in body mind and spirit, as Jesus loved and cared for himself so you can be strengthened to live as a faithful follower of Christ in this season?

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.