

Sermon 06 September 2020 – Season of creation. Love your neighbor.

September! The month of spring. A season that fills us with lightness – of step, mind and emotion. It is almost as if we are pulled to shake off all heaviness and burdens. Isn't that so? We are filled with a sense of freshness and new hope. Of new beginnings. A time to praise the Lord. To rejoice and sing a new song. In the church, September marks our celebration of the season of creation. When we think of creation, we are reminded of not only the formation and gift of life but also of our interconnectedness to all life – God, nature and fellow human beings. Our readings today are all about our relationships and interactions with God and one another. They remind us that we are to love our neighbor. But, more than that, they challenge us to examine who our neighbour is and what it means to love our neighbour.

The Exodus reading tells the story of the final plague – the killing of every firstborn in the land of Egypt: both human beings and animals – and of Israel's freedom from slavery. It is a story that tells of the origin of Passover, the commemoration of how God rescued Israel from slavery and which they were told to "celebrate as a festival to the Lord" throughout all generations (v. 14). But, this story also gives us a sense of how we are to love and care for creation. In verse 3-4 Israel is told "...they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it." In other words, participation in this ritual should not exclude small households or result in waste. Neighbours – those in close proximity to one another - are to come together and share in proportion to their need. Do we share with our closest neighbour – those who come into our space – the homeless and hungry - the beggar? Or do we seek only to see to the needs of our own households and does this action result in waste. It is said that "forty percent of food is wasted every day while two and a half billion people go hungry." V3-4 challenges us to examine our life- styles. To use only what we need. To share and to commit ourselves to reducing food waste.

The psalm is one of praise. The psalmist calls the Israelites to sing a new song in praise and thanksgiving for God's faithfulness in freeing them from oppression and slavery. We too are called to sing a new song. A song of love in action as we seek freedom from oppression and destruction for all God's creation. Bishop Geoff Davies says, "As humans we praise God with our human neighbours, but also in the company of our neighbours from the great web of life."

Paul, in the Romans reading, reminds us that love is to be central to our lives. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Love is the fulfilling of the law because it does no wrong to a neighbour (v10). But what is this love? Is it a warm fuzzy feeling? Willie S. Teague, a retired Methodist minister says, "Love is the energy that drives our actions in response to the love God shows us...it is working for the good of our neighbour." Just imagine what our world would be like if we all believed and lived these words – "Love is the energy that drives our actions in response to the love God shows us...it is working for the good of our neighbour." (The Upper Room Disciplines 2020) This statement, however, does beg the question, who is our – your and my - neighbour? Willie S. Teague says that Jesus reminds us that even our enemies are our neighbours. In Matthew 5: 44 Jesus says we are to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. Another version puts it like this, "...love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves." (The Message Bible) And so, in practical terms Willie S. Teague says that when we act "for good on behalf of those we love," it keeps us from breaking our promises/commitments to them and that when we act "for good on behalf of our neighbours, including our enemies" - those who have hurt us/ trespassed against us - it keeps us from harming them.

In terms of the season of creation and our stewardship in caring for our environment and all of creation, Bishop Geoff Davies reminds us that "Our neighbours are the people who live downstream of our waste. Our neighbours are those who are impacted by climate change because of our choices of energy or investment income. Our neighbours are the generations to come who will live on a bleak and barren world because

of our consumerist society. Our neighbours are also the many living creatures who make up the web of life on which we depend, and which God has called us to safeguard.” Love as an act for good on behalf of creation, thus, keeps us from selfish exploitation of God’s provision for the common good

This then brings us to the Gospel reading where Jesus tackles the issue of how we are to respond in situations where we are hurt, offended or trespassed against. In other words, how do we deal with situations and behavior that cause harm to others? How can such person(s) be restored to the community? Jesus says, try all means possible to resolve and restore. Firstly, address it privately, if that does not work then involve two or three others and then the broader community. Remember that the goal is to bring about healing and restoration – it is to be an act of love not punishment. The church/ faith community has a responsibility to act, to discipline and address issues that undermine and break down. This means that the church/ faith community is required to act in protecting and empowering the vulnerable. The loving action is to listen in order to understand and restore. Such situations require that we engage sensitively and prayerfully in open, loving communication that both speaks and listens. When we act in this way as community- lovingly and prayerfully - God is right there with us working to bring about wholeness and restoration. Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (v20).

COVID-19 has certainly highlighted and reminded us of the interconnectedness of all life as it has moved across the globe. This pandemic has negatively affected all our lives – rich and poor, individuals and nations. “We have been made aware of the plight of our neighbours, the homeless, the hungry, the sick and bereaved.” (Bishop Geoff Davies: Season of Creation Year A). We have seen the effects of our life style choices on all creation. But we have also seen a positive impact on the environment as a result of COVID-19 and our suspension of our everyday activities. With lockdown measures implemented in countries across the globe many activities came to a standstill. We engaged in less travel. We saw the closure of factories and the halting of fishing to name just a few things. This led to a decrease in emissions, pollution and a regeneration of plant and animal life. This highlights the

fact that when we show little regard for one another and for our environment, everyone suffers.

Archbishop Tutu says, “We are all part of the problem and need to all be part of the solution.” This week, with these words in mind, I would like us to pause and reflect on the following:

- Firstly, how we might act for good in our neighbour’s life. What are the life-style changes we need to make so that we can stop people from becoming hungry?
- Secondly, the times we cause harm to others. May we consciously seek to live in harmony with God and one another, especially when we are tempted to behave in a quarrelsome and jealous manner.
- Thirdly, the different ways in which we can get involved in caring for creation, such as reducing our food wastage, growing indigenous plants, not using pesticides that destroy biodiversity and not littering to name but a few practical things.

Loving our neighbour is not an easy task. Love is not a warm fuzzy feeling. It is hard work. It is difficult but it is something we are called to do. So, I pray that love will be the energy that motivates us to act for good on behalf of all our neighbours, both human and the entire natural world.

Amen