

Our Sacred Cows

Mark 2:23-3:6; Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

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“When love is the way, there’s plenty good room for all God’s children,” said the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church at the royal wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markel.

That theme of love continued in Bishop Curry’s comments week before last, when I heard him in Washington DC. As many of you know, I was in our nation’s capital for a preaching conference. Our schedule was cleared for participants on Thursday night so that any of the 1700 of us who wanted to, could attend an event entitled “Reclaiming Jesus”, which had been scheduled long before Bishop Curry had any idea of a royal wedding invite.

The event, which was the kick off to what is being described as a movement, is an effort by some major names in modern Christianity both progressive and conservative, evangelical and mainline to reclaim our common faith and love in Jesus above all else. The signatories of the Reclaiming Jesus document say our Christian faith has been hijacked by others who claim the Christian name by putting the love of a lot of other things in front of the love for Jesus Christ, who taught love of God and neighbor as our only call.

Curry said, “We are not partisan group. We are not a left-wing group. We are not a right-wing group. We are a Jesus movement.” He said the event was rooted in the call to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” be that neighbor Republican, Democrat, black, white, Latino or LGBTQ.

For Christians, it’s all about love...isn’t it? According to Mark’s Gospel account a few chapters after this morning’s lesson, Jesus responded to a lawyer who asked him “What must I do to inherit eternal life”, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

That was the crux of Jesus’ message: Love God and love neighbor, and yourself. See and treat others as we were all created, as in the image of God. That must be our rule by which we live. But if we look around our world, I’m afraid our current reality is far from that command.

It’s complicated: Loving other people above all else, even the rules and regulations we have set for ourselves and others; even above ideologies about what we think is right. When those are poked, it can get people hopping mad. It did so for Jesus as evidenced in our text this morning.

The story goes, Jesus and his disciples were walking in the fields on their way somewhere, and they picked some grain in a nearby field because they were hungry. The religious leaders, reacted...“the law says you’re not supposed to do that...it’s the Sabbath”. Jesus says, but they were hungry, and tries to appeal to a similar situation with King David, which would mean something to them in a religious context. Then Jesus comes across a man whose hand has been deformed. He has compassion and heals it, restoring the man to health. Good right? NO...it’s against the sacred law of what is allowable on the Sabbath.

Here we witness the only time in the Scripture that tells us that Jesus had anger. It takes a lot to get Jesus mad and the petty arguments of the Pharisees pressed his “hot button.” Matthew and Luke omit Jesus’ reference to being “angry” as if his being angry would be too human. (We recall Jesus cleansing the temple and driving out the money changers, but the word, “anger,” is not used in that story although Jesus was using a whip and appeared angry at the desecration of the temple.)

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was in power in this province of Galilee, and it is assumed that the Herodians were people of the ruling class who were associated with the reigning governor of Galilee.

One scholar is bold in characterizing this as "hardness of heart" which is the essence of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Scholars agree, "Thus begins the plot to plan for the execution of Jesus." The seed was planted at this moment for the unfolding drama and events that eventually led up to Jesus' death.

What is a sacred cow? It is an idiom which refers to a belief out of Hinduism. Hindus believe that cows are sacred and a reflection of divinity, and therefore they do not eat them. Honoring the cow inspires in people the virtues of gentleness and connects them with nature. The cow gives milk and cream, yogurt and cheese, butter and ice cream, and ghee. The milk of a cow is believed to refine a person.

We use the term "sacred cow" as an idiom... it doesn't have a literal meaning of being about a cow or religion. When spoken or written it refers to a person or a belief that has been respected for a long time. It has become sacred and people are then afraid or unwilling to criticize or question it.

What are your sacred cows? What are mine? What beliefs or ideals do you and I hold as the foundation of who we are, so much so, that to tug at them engenders rage and shakes us to our core?

Perhaps for the religious leaders who gathered around Jesus, their sacred cow was "The Law" itself. They put that above the needs of the people who were hungry or who needed healing.

Jesus was always about loving the person first above all else, and that created issues for others. ANYTHING we put above loving God with our whole heart, and loving neighbor as self has the potential of being a sacred cow...and therefore a block to our spiritual lives...it can even become an idol and sinful.

Here are some we might consider:

- How about love of country---patriotism: if we put our love of our country over the love of and the need for justice for the individuals in it that may be a sacred cow. Perhaps that's why Colin Kaepernick and others who have knelt on the sidelines at football games have stirred so much anger. It's as if those kneeling have touched the man's withered hand on the Sabbath. They have poked a sacred cow to call attention to the ways people of color have been treated in our country. Just a thought.

Here's another one

- Two weeks ago, a friend texted me around 10pm and told me about a thread which was on Wilton 412. For those of you not in town, that is one of several Facebook pages for town members only constituted as a place where people can express their views on various issues. That, as opposed to Wilton 411, which has far less opinion.

I keep my eye out for 412, because it seems to allow expression of feelings which are present in town. Not all of it is pretty.

Anyway, the post in question, was a video of an imam and a journalist. It was poor quality and was not from a station in the US. The imam was telling the interviewer that the Prophet Mohammed taught that men are allowed to beat their wives. I immediately stopped watching it and found myself reacting with anger.

A few people in town had already contributed to the thread slamming Muslims. I was angry, so I wrote..."Friends, this thread is racist. It doesn't express what I know of mainline Islam." And so forth. I asked the administrators of the site to review whether this fit the criteria of what is permissible as stated in their guidelines (no racist or pornographic comments). The poster responded to me a few more times, but the next day, the thread was removed. I felt vindicated and satisfied.

Then, in a way that only the Holy Spirit can do...over the next day or two, I felt uneasy. While I believe that the right action was taken in removing the thread, I began to feel uneasy with my somewhat sanctimonious and self-righteous response to the man. Regardless of his intent or belief, which I will never know, nor do I need to know, I shut him down fairly quickly by calling it and by association, him, racist.

I decided the only thing to do was to reach out to him personally and invite him for coffee. I do not know him. He did not respond, and I don't blame him, but it was a sincere effort.

That's how the idea for coffee and conversation between Rabbi Bearman, Dr. Raissi from the Islamic Institute and me which was held yesterday started: To try and begin conversations and help foster understanding with people as human beings. The man on FB had expressed in the thread that he is fearful that Muslims are trying to overtake our country and institute sharia law. Imagine how a conversation with a Muslim neighbor from Wilton who is soft spoken and extremely intelligent as well as devout in her faith might make create a different reality for both of them. (The event was extremely successful and we will have more)

Here's the takeaway for me. I failed to love this man where he was. I did not view him with compassion. I perpetuated the divisive rhetoric which is plaguing our country/world right now, instead of loving him, and listening to him. My sacred cow of being a standard bearer for justice and naming racism was poked. Again, I believe that the administrators did the right thing in taking down the thread, but I could have handled it totally differently from the beginning. Instead, I perpetuated polarization.

In our recent interfaith program on civility at the Wilton Public Library, we discussed this. The topic was, "Civility in an age of Polarization". One of the two extremely competent speakers from the UN said, "We can't give mercy or love to another if we don't first love and have mercy on ourselves." A Muslim woman was preaching the Gospel, really.

Brilliantly, the scholars who put the lectionary readings together must have known this as well: The psalmist beautifully describes the absolute, intimate love of God for you and for me. This God who has searched and known us...so much so that we can feel hemmed in at times. God loves you and me and knows every intricate piece about us, even those parts which make US squirm. And yet, we are and always have been God's Beloved.

Oh, how our world would be different if we all treated each other with the depth of understanding of how much God knows and loves us. Loving neighbor wouldn't even be an issue. And when our sacred cows are poked, we might even let out a chuckle as we see how silly we are. God's love is that powerful, and the power of the Holy Spirit to pry open our grip on the things which you and I feel so righteous about will soften us to see our neighbor as loved and complex as we are.

For Jesus, to love your neighbor as you love yourself was to practice justice towards your fellow human beings. For him that included the poor, the immigrant, the despised. May we do so with great humility and grace.

"When love is the way, there's plenty good room for all God's children!"