

# North Kildonan United Church

12<sup>th</sup> February 2023 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18

I Corinthians 3: 10-11, 16-23

Matthew 5: 38-48

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*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

It was in the fall of 2006 when I moved into my current home in St James. Like any new home, that is, new to me because the house was actually built in 1940, it has many features I appreciate and yet other items that I miss. For instance, my former home had a working fireplace. This one has a mantle but no fireplace. But it has a garage, invaluable in the winter, which the former home didn't have, and back in 2006 it had a wonderful apple tree in the backyard.

My first experience of apple trees was in the 90s when I planted a Goodland apple tree in the backyard of my home in Wolseley. It produced wonderful apples, which the local wasps enjoyed as much as I did. One day I noticed a bird's nest developing on the branches. Upon closer examination I could see that the birds were clearly Eaton's shoppers, because interwoven amongst the other nest materials there were strands of that famous blue twine Eaton's used to bind up their items for delivery.

It was late summer when I toured what would become my new home. The apple tree was full of soon to be ripe apples. However, when I took possession of the house, every last apple had been picked. There wasn't a spare apple high up on a branch, nor any that might have fallen to the ground. It was as though extremely hungry locusts had invited their buddies to the feast of the century in my backyard.

On the one hand, the absence of apples meant no wasps, which is a good thing. But on the other hand, some apples could have been left in the fridge as a welcome to your new home gesture.

The interesting aspect of this is that the previous owners were devout evangelical Christians, who apparently had never read today's passage from Leviticus: *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.*

I wasn't poor, so I didn't fall into that category, but on some level I was an alien, in that I had moved onto the street from elsewhere. And if not an alien, then I was at least someone who probably overpaid for the house and discovered, once the wallpaper was removed, that the house was full of cracks and was basically held together with drywall tape. I'm not complaining and I'm very happy with my home, even though the apple tree did become infected and had to be cut down a number of years later.

But let's go back to the teaching from Leviticus. The people of Israel are forming their life together, a life to be based on love of neighbour and the upholding of community values. To put it more succinctly, these people of God are called to live ethically, to live with concern and compassion for the strangers in their midst as well as to care for their neighbours. The strangers are the aliens referred to in the passage we just heard. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt is the way the teaching is given.

In a sense, the teachings we heard Peggy read are another version of the Ten Commandments, with some variations. For instance:

When you harvest, think of those who are hungry and leave some of your crop as a gift to those who have no harvest. Don't be so greedy as to completely strip away every last bit of produce. We can think of the 1930s, of depression days in Canada, when people foraged for spare potatoes left on the fields once the crop was dug up. Or those newsreels of starving Europeans after the last war, searching for bits of coal near the railways or spare produce left on the fields. Though probably not planned by the farmers, the uncollected bits of vegetables meant life or death for those desperately short of food. However, the modern day garden robbers who sneak into community gardens and whisk away as much as they can carry are probably not the alien or the poor of Leviticus. As we heard: "You shall not steal".

And each fall, as those of us with gardens bring in our tomatoes and cucumbers and other produce to share with our congregation, the spirit of this reading from Leviticus is brought to life amongst us.

Today's passage, which incidentally is the only reading in the entire three year lectionary from Leviticus, is a wonderful guide to ethical living. It speaks of justice and fairness, of showing respect to other people by honest commerce and prompt payment of salaries, of honouring another person's reputation by not gossiping or slandering their name.

These teachings are an invitation to live a life of holiness. If Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is correct, and who am I to say he isn't, these teachings are offered to the people as an invitation from God. As he writes: "In love God called Abraham to follow him. In love God led the way for the wandering Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day, fire by night. In love God calls the people Israel to come close to Him, to be regular visitors at His house, to share His quality of holiness, difference, apartness: to become, as it were, mediators of His presence to the world."

"Leviticus is about why love needs law and law needs love. It is about acts of devotion that bring two beings close, even when one of them is vaster than the universe and the other is a mortal of flesh and blood. It is about being human, sinning, falling short, always conscious of our fragile hold on life, yet seeking to come close to God and—what is sometimes harder—allowing Him to come close to us."

Leviticus was written centuries before Christ and yet, like so much of Holy Scripture, it still speaks to us today. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament have profoundly influenced Western law and government and history and culture down through the ages. Rabbi Sacks illustrates this fact this way.

He talks of four revolutions that have shaped the modern world. The English Revolution, led by Oliver Cromwell, ran from 1642-1651. The American Revolution was 1776. The French Revolution was 1789 and the Russian Revolution was 1917.

As he says, in England and America, revolution brought war, but led to a gradual growth of civil liberties, human rights, representative government and democracy. In France, the reign of terror of 1793 and 1794 led to more than 40,000 executions by guillotine. The Russian revolution of 1917, which led to Stalin being in charge from 1924 to 1953, resulted in as many as twenty million unnatural deaths. Revolutionary France and the Soviet Union, each founded on a dream of utopia, ended in a nightmare of hell.

So why the difference amongst the four nations? Rabbi Sacks points out that the English and American revolutions were inspired by the Hebrew Bible as read and interpreted by the Puritans. The invention of the printing press, the Reformation, the rise of literacy and the availability of scripture in one's own language, all led to people reading the Bible for themselves. And what did they read? The teachings of the prophets, stories of civil disobedience, the need to resist tyrants in the name of God. As he says: "The political philosophy of the English revolutionaries and the Puritans who set sail for America in the 1620s and 1630s was dominated by the work of the Christian Hebraists who based their thought on the history of ancient Israel."

And, we should add, as Christians, those Puritans took seriously the gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of St Paul. As we heard this morning: "*You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

"*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*". Perhaps these texts were not necessarily the inspiration of the English parliamentarians nor the American revolutionaries, but the passages do echo the vision of a just and loving society as suggested in Leviticus.

But the French and Russian revolutions were hostile to religion and were inspired instead by philosophy, notably Jean Jacques Rousseau in France and Karl Marx in Russia. The English and American revolutions were based on revelation, the French and Russian on reason.

When you think of it, a revolution based on scripture would be shaped by the conviction that humans are created in the image of God, that slavery is wrong, be it in

Egypt under Pharaoh or in Israel under the Romans. After all, at the heart of Israel is the idea that God intervened in history to liberate slaves. As Rabbi Sacks puts it: "It is no accident that Israel was born as a nation under conditions of slavery. It has carried throughout history the memory of those years—the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of servitude—because the people of Israel serves as an eternal reminder to itself and the world of the moral necessity of liberty and the vigilance needed to protect it. The free God desires the free worship of free human beings."

A number of years ago I freed myself from the tyranny of cable TV and more often than not I follow the various lectures and documentaries found on YouTube. There have been some fascinating programmes on the history of Western civilization as well as clear analysis of contemporary problems and issues in our societies. Some of the presenters make the case for the Judeo-Christian influence on the values we have inherited and which we enjoy. Some of these same presenters admit to a certain agnosticism towards God, not necessarily believing in God but nevertheless they are immensely grateful for the ways the Bible and religious practice and teachings have shaped and enriched Western society.

The distance in time between Leviticus and our present day is immense, yet that vision of a society founded on generosity and kindness, honesty and fair play, forgiveness and reconciliation, respect and equal justice, that vision is as valid and necessary today as it was when it was first written. Amen.