

**Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself**  
A Sermon by Rev. Betty Kornitzer  
November 7, 2004

I open with a reading from The Gospel of Mark 12:28-31

A scribe asked Jesus:

Which is the first commandment of all?

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, . . . thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

And the second *is* like, *namely* this,

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. -- Mark 12:28-31

The second reading is a prayer by Alan Paton, author of Cry the Beloved Country, his novel about apartheid in South Africa.:

“O Love, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;

open my ears that I may hear their cries;

open my heart so that they need not be without comfort.

Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.

Show me where love and hope and faith are needed, and use me to bring them to those places.

And so open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for You.”

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The national elections are behind us. There is jubilation in some hearts and despair in others, and the work of the world remains the same: to enlarge the realm of Love, and Justice and Peace. There is much work ahead, *and* the greatest contribution that each of us has to offer is our own peaceful heart. We are a nation in need of healing and reconciliation. We have all experienced a brutally divisive political campaign. Americans are both angry and scared. Increasingly, we have become a polarized people, standing on opposite banks of the raging river that is our joint national experience. The waters are treacherous and dark, we have made them so with the storms of our anger and our fears. Safe passage is not possible. The winds of resentment and self-righteousness bluster and sting our shivering hearts. Instinctively we know they will not subside without our

intervention. How shall we cross the river? Of what use is a peaceful heart in the midst of such deep and painful divisions?

Can you imagine the power of millions and millions of peaceful hearts declining the temptation to assail their political opponents? The peaceful heart, the loving heart is an instrument of transformation. The peaceful heart can build a bridge.

And that is what I believe that Jesus spoke of when he commanded his listeners to “Love their neighbors as themselves.” I want to underscore the essence of Jesus’ commandment. He did not say that your neighbor was loveable or that his actions were admirable, he simply that you love your neighbor as yourself. Bridge building begins with two strong and reliable foundations, one alone will not suffice. And so, in guiding his followers in the ways of love, the rabbi Jesus opened with the imperative of self love. Self love was a required text in Jesus’ lessons. He knew that heart that does not see the beauty in itself, lacks the capacity to recognize the inherent beauty in another.

So in these post-election times, let us set the intention to ford the chaotic waters of our discontent, and to build bridges of understanding and healing. Our religious beliefs can help us here.

Our faith reflects centuries of questioning, working with and reinterpreting the Judeo-Christian tradition from which we sprang. And so we have always studied to teachings of the Rabbi Jesus, whose first commandment was:

*“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength...”*

A teaching on loving God can have great meaning for all of us here, regardless of our personal understanding of the divine. Some of us call it God, some see it as the mystery of that is beyond our understanding has something unique and precious to offer each one of us. Unitarian Universalist Nancy Shaffer expresses this in a poem entitled *Were I to Teach a Course on God*, it reads in part as follows:

*I would teach God with plates of pomegranates,  
Both before they were opened and after.  
I would bring wet washcloths.  
We would bury our faces and eat-  
All that luminescent purple-red,  
Those clear bright kernels fitted in tight rows  
On small and tumbling hills-  
And all that juice, so easily broken,  
Sweet and puckery at once.  
We would say nothing.*

*I would teach this way,  
With plates of fruit, a knife, many washcloths.  
With my eyes very large; my mouth mostly silent,  
So all might eat.*

Let us be together in silence for a few moments to rest in the place that this reading has brought us to.

*Bell Sound.*

And now it's time for each of us to build our own bridge. We are building strong foundations on our side of the river. Now a roadway must be built to span the angry waters and connect the great divide.

This road will not be constructed of steel and cement – it wants the stuff that pomegranates and times of silence are made of. It wants an opening to the possibility of love and forgiveness; it wants creative mystery, nothing less will suffice for the building of this bridge.

In matters of the spirit, as in most of life's endeavors, timing is everything. My son, Benjamin, taught me a lesson in timing when he was about six years old. Benjamin was best pals with his older brother Michael, who was 16 at the time. They boys were just about inseparable. One night they had a really big fight and were not talking to each other. When I went in to put Ben to sleep, I asked him if he wanted me to talk to Michael for him. He said "No thanks Mom, it's like a cement truck, 'ya know what I mean?" Truly baffled, I said "Well, Ben, not really, what do you mean?" Ben replied: "Oh you know Mom, when they make a sidewalk, first the cement truck comes and it pour out the cement, then it smooths it all out and they roll it flat, but you can't walk on it until it's dry, so I'll talk to Michael in the morning."

And so it is with the human heart, we have to wait for the cement to dry before we step out on the bridge.

Once on the bridge we are called to see with the tender eyes of the spirit, to love with a heart so filled with compassion that it eclipses the mold of all our prior understandings. On this bridge we are called to embrace a vision that believes in possibilities. We are called to what theologian Sharon Welch refers to as an “ethic of risk.” Such an ethic acknowledges the broken-ness of our world and obliges us to work for the good without waiting for or depending upon the illusion or certainty of success. This is an ethics of the long haul, it is an ethic of vision. The ethic of risk requires that we remain engaged, and to act. Friends, please, cultivate the peaceful hear *and* stay engaged. It is not one or the other, both are necessary.

Standing on the bridge, our feet planted on something greater than our finite selves, there we experience the oneness of all beings. There, as we have learned to trust the seasons and the tides of existence, we may come to believe more deeply that the earth moves with some much greater plan than our own. There, above the waters at last, we may see clearly that our need to be right by making another wrong has been spiritually wounding.

Friends, it is time to heal, it is time for us to relinquish our need to be right by making others wrong. Whether you are celebrating the election, or are desperately disheartened by the results, our work remains the same, to remember that though afraid and oft times misguided, we are one people, full of beauty, filled with light.

Let us be guided by the words of theologian Thomas Merton:

*“Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire can reach – the core of their reality, the person that each on is in God’s eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are, if only we could se each other that way all the time, there would be no more need for war or hatred or cruelty or greed, I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship one another.”*

Does this sound like loving thy neighbor as thyself? Yes it does, if you remove the layers upon layers of fear and pain that conceal our beauty and keep us fighting and apart.

Amazing things can happen on the bridge, dialogue, conversation and understanding. I am reminded of the collaboration between Senator John McCain, an ex- POW and Senator John Kerry, leader of Viet Nam Veterans Against the War. They met on the bridge, sought common ground and worked together to normalize relations with Viet Nam and to end the trade embargo to that country.

If we but embrace an ethic of risk, if we dare to relinquish the need to be right, we may find ourselves on a bridge that is full of possibilities. The universe does not need us to denounce each other on its behalf, but to care for each other.

I close with a prayer adapted from the words of Marianne Williamson:

Love, please remove from my mind the tendency to judge. Please remove from my mind the tendency to hate.

Please remove from my mind the tendency to blame.

Please reveal to me a way to stand in my power, through Love instead of fear, and through peace instead of violence.

May I hear not the voice of anger, but only the voice of Love.

And teach me how not to hate those who hate me.

Transform the darkness into light, and use my mind as an instrument of your harmlessness. Thank you.

Blessed Be my friends, and Amen.