

JOSHUA 3:7-17

PSALM 107:1-7, 33-37

I THESSALONIANS 2:9-13

MATTHEW 23:1-12

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost; Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time

(All Saints Texts: REVELATION 7:9-17; PSALM 34:1-10, 22; I JOHN 3:1-3; MATTHEW 5:1-12)

November 5, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

What Kind of Love?!?

Joshua declares for all to hear what he claims to be the word from the Lord, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites.” NOT! The writer left every group out but the parasites! Bad humor intended! Yes, this and other graphically atrocious texts are in the Bible. And we all know what the writer of Joshua was implying based on other biblical readings that shock our sensibilities and reflect tribal, clannish, tendencies, none of which are becoming of civilized human beings. With these words and others like them, seeds of animosity and discord were firmly sowed, planted in the minds of those who would swear by their sacred texts as being dictated directly from God. These archaic words are a license to kill, to practice genicidal principles in the name of the God who was wrongly credited with them.

Love is a noun! Love is a verb! Love is love! Love is! The writer of the pastoral epistle of I John, in a very short narrative carved out as one of our lectionary readings for today, beautifully describes the essence of God’s love, reminding readers then and now that we are all children of God. In this Johannine letter, the writer reinforces a wonderfully inclusive and loving promise, saying, “that is what we are!” Yes, we are all children of God. Despite behavior to the contrary God is a heavenly parent who refuses to give up on any of us, no matter! We continue to face the not-so-new reality of a divided and divisive world,

confronted by the polarities of our not so global village that is now even more beset by conflict, wars dominating theatres in both Europe and the Middle East, every toxic battle threatening to pull us all deep into the vortex. And of course, we, as these not so United States, polarized in so many ways, are already deeply involved in both wars, up to our proverbial elbows, way more than knee deep, no turning back in our financial and our weaponry commitments, trying desperately not to employ our military! Good luck with that! At its best, humanity is a beautiful tapestry woven together, a harmonious splendor accentuating the oneness in our diversity, a kaleidoscope of every stripe, a spectrum of every race, an eclectically pluralistic expression reflecting every creed and culture, yes, valuing every religion revealing a vast array of beliefs seeking to unlock the mystery of mystery. Unfortunately, we need a constant reminder that this is who we are and were created to be. Sadly, we desperately need to get the memo, that we are all children of the one God who made all of us and loves us so, so, very much, and desires that we not just get along, that we find some baseline level of pedestrian détente, a mere insufficient tolerance of one another, but that we discover whatever secret is necessary to fully accept and affirm, yes, that we love, that we love one another as we have been unconditionally loved, love allowing us the abundant life in our time here on earth, modeling whatever eternity holds for us. At our worst we circle our wagons, anxious and insecure, fearfully putting tribe and clan above all else. Yes, with every ounce of our being we are by design meant to give and receive love. We are made by Love to be love! The history of religion in our world shows clearly that it is way past time that we cease making our religious persuasions weapons of war, plowshares into swords, our sectarian beliefs dividing us as if our way is the only way, a oneway highway. The only way out of the mess we have made, the myriad self-inflicted conflicts that bedevil and plague us as a species, the seemingly countless predicaments that seek to devour, to consume us as a civilization, is to find love, to rediscover or perhaps discover authentic, genuine, love for the first time, love the overriding principle that vanquishes all our selfishness, the false bravado fueling the arrogant gravitas of our narcissistically presumed superiority. In the Gospel lection for today in Matthew we read where Jesus condemns the self-serving tendencies of the Pharisees who go out of there way to show just how religious they could be, making a mockery of the accoutrements that were designed to be visible signs of humility. Not very

saintly! Jesus gives some tough advice to his followers, that they do as the Pharisees say but not do as they do. Sad commentary! We must find common ground as a human species or we will bury our selves on hills of our own making, mountains from what should have been molehills, none of which are worthy of anyone's demise. Religion that is based in subversive conversionary tactics, crusades, inquisitions, or jihad, any pogrom, a word I just hate, facilitated by one group over and against another, any form of prejudice, any my way or the highway ultimatums, reveals the demonic side of our human being and doing, a disgusting sign exposing pure evil. There is no divinity, no God in it, free will horrifically on display.

As we celebrate All Saints today we are reminded of the spark of the Divine within us all, that each human being is created, each one uniquely crafted, *imago Dei*, in the very image of God, stamped with the Holy, an imprimatur that is part and parcel of all that makes us tic, that is intended to make us whole. Over the course of this past year, and in this past month especially and particularly, we have taken many steps backward, a huge leap in reverse reminding us of the many painful and poignant moments of the rearview mirror of history. As a global village we keep moving the bar of acceptability, lines in the sand that continually shift, having more inflection points than we can stand! We stand at a precipice, not knowing which direction will lead us from here. War and rumors of war, of the worldwide variety, is now being more than whispered, but feared by many, including thoughtful people not known to panic, to shift with the tide or blow with the winds of idle rumors, not prone to run around screaming that the sky is falling. Not to be a purveyor of doom, a prophet of gloom, but these are dark days, the dead now countless, or so it seems, the endless bodies and parts piled high to the point of causing an insulated, protective numbness, a strange response or reaction when the exact opposite is demanded. Only those who are not paying attention are blissfully unaware. Where is our anger, our righteous indignation? Yes, to our benefit or detriment, for the most part we live in a protective bubble, confined within the safe cocoons of our shores, except on the rarest of occasions when we are not! Antisemitism and Islamaphobia are a scourge, a heatheness rage. What affects the one, any one, any group, affects us all, no matter how immune, how safe and secure, we think we may be. Social justice must be the standard by which we all live and move and have our being,

overwhelming our every breath, the imperative prescription for an imperiled world. In our own country talk of another civil war has become more than remotely, no longer espoused by lone wolves wearing anything but sheep's clothing, at least for the time being, mainstream, a possibility bantered about as probability, debated in the media, in the local pub, around the water cooler, and on the street corner. It is as if some are politely choosing their next menu item at the supper club.

So what do we do when the big picture appears too big, more than we can handle, nightmarish in so many ways? Well, for those of us who are people of faith, we rely, we lean on our faith, and faith demands action. After all, as the book of James reminds us, faith without works is dead! And our faith, as with any valid faith, is born from above, is born from the Spirit, is born from love. There is no other alternative. There can be no other option. It is true that so many of the world's holy books have a dark side, contain content that is simply not suitable for any audience. There are multiple narratives that advocate for ultimate destruction, the complete and utter annihilation of any tribe or clan that looks different, that behaves different, that is beautifully different, religiously and otherwise.

In the reading from the Hebrew Bible for today that I chose not to have publically read, the lectionary includes a lection from Joshua that is part of a subset of readings known as *herem* texts. These texts, from what we traditionally and erroneously call the Old Testament, are numerous and constitute a type of readings that contain the graphically horrific content advocating for the utter extermination of a whole host of people groups, those who were deemed dangerous adversaries, outright enemies, proud native citizens who were dismissed as obstacles, who stood in the way of the manifest destiny agenda of the conquering Israelites. Listen carefully to these biblical words that we have historically accepted as holy writ, canonized as scripture. "Joshua said to the Israelites, 'Come close. Listen to the words of the Lord your God.' Then Joshua said, 'This is how you will know that the living God is among you. You will completely remove the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites before you.'" Yes, Palestinians are the direct descendents of one or more of these ancestral kindred. The biblical writer was

basically saying, in other words, you will not only seek their removal from their homeland, but you will wipe them from the face of the earth. Folks, these were not the instructions of God but were written to justify the unjustifiable. Turf wars have defined the human struggle ever since someone attempted to seize a neighbor's cave or its contents! And throughout the Church's history we have traditionally proclaimed this kind of incendiary language as "The Word of the Lord!" and have boldly and thoughtlessly, mindlessly, responded with conviction, "Thanks be to God!" No, these are not Godly words. No matter which religious text is being invoked, critical thinking, critical methodology, should always be applied, no equivocations, no exceptions. A major part of the saving grace for our understanding and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible came with the discoveries of Julius Wellhausen in 1878 with the advent of the Documentary Hypothesis exploring the nuance of historical-critical methodologies. Game changer! We are a grateful beneficiary! Practically speaking, there is no kinder or gentler way to banish anyone from their native land. In many instances this command included the slaughter of all livestock, women, and children. At the least, pillaging, and no doubt rape, was an acceptable norm. Yes, the Bible, our Bible, advocated for the brutal treatment, the cruel and inhumane deportation of the indigenous back in the day and those words for many extremists, cultural purists, separatists, supremacists all, still seem to ring true and relevant. Yes, it all sounds too familiar! It may be Bible but it is wrong and not of God!

The root causes for the struggles in the Middle East today has a long and sordid history, the issues multifaceted, multilayered, the complexities confused and confounding beyond any rational degree. And as we all know, when religious passions, psychotic religious zealotry, become a major ingredient, the defining determinant demanding an illogical societal separation, fragile social systems cannot tolerate the insulting intolerance. Of course, there is another side to the biblical equation from the Hebrew Bible and that is the command, the divine demand that the Hebrews who would become Israelites and became known as Jews around the time of Jesus, were compelled to take extra care of those considered to be, classified as the other, the aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers in their midst, that they welcome and provide a means to a meaningful life for those now forced to be in their care. Leviticus, of all books, is clear about this expectation. We have all asked the biblical question. How can these these texts

appear side by side in the biblical narrative, invoking such radically divergent demands, the dichotomies of engagement not even remotely similar? The simple answer is that the ancients who wrote, edited, and compiled these stories, after centuries of oral tradition, were not looking for cohesiveness or consistency and we should not make that unfair and illogical demand, have that unreasonable expectation for them. This irrational irony often suggested by contemporary readers of the Bible would have been lost in the translation back in the day, not a part of the limited thinking of the ancients, would not have occurred in the pedestrian reality of their simplistic, and shortsighted world. It is up to us to make reasonable decisions, to come to conclusions in the best interests of all parties. As we all know about the Bible, it is a collection of books that are full of horrific and wonderful metaphorical imagery. Yes, we are forced to pick and choose. There is no other rational choice. Once again, that means being loving, choosing love as the only acceptable, the only possible, option, no other outcome suitable, sufficing in any way.

And that brings us full circle, right back to where we began in this sermon, trying to make some sense out of senselessness, seeking to find our way including any helpful solution, individually and collectively, winding through a maze of issues that call for calm, cool, deliberation, something that is sorely lacking by all parties, at least in this Middle Eastern version of warring adversaries. The atrocities perpetrated by Hamas, the real enemy perpetrating the atrocities that have led to a humanitarian crisis, were of the most violent actions ever committed by one group over another, each Israeli a citizen having a name, friends and family. The revenge by Israel, though understandable, has cost many innocents their lives, civilians bombed as collateral damage. Palestinians too have a name, friends and family. No, two wrongs never make a right! Indeed just war is just, but paybacks, reprisals, retribution will only perpetuate a vicious cycle, the beat going on and on infinitum. So, just what gives the right? As two friends, both women, one Jewish, the other Muslim, said in an interview on NBC's Nightly News Friday, it is possible to hold "multiple truths!" The human drama is a complicated one and the dynamics in the Middle East prove this beyond all doubt. It always has been and so it will remain. All of us who are witnesses to these crimes against humanity, including the graphic visuals recorded by the media and by Hamas, do not doubt that Hamas clearly deserves

its demise and that Israel was justified in a response. There simply is no grace from either warring faction! There never is! War is never simple, uncomplicated, devoid of suffering by those who are its victims.

Every year when we celebrate All Saints we ponder the proposition of what it means to be a saint, to be anointed with this thing called sainthood. I would not begin to tell you what that is or what that looks like, though I believe that as the very images of our creator that we are all saints by virtue of our very human being and doing. Whatever a saint or sainthood is I can guarantee you it is devoid of war mongering, has nothing to do with our warring madness. But this I believe I do know and can verify, that whatever a saint is, and we are working on our sainthood each and every day, our imaginary halos getting more polished as we go, that sainthood, that being a saint, is inextricably tied to the way we love and that includes every positive human interaction available. These wonderful images of saintliness and love are enmeshed in ways that make them indistinguishable one from the other. All human beings have the capacity to love, to be loving, because all human beings are children of God. Know that whatever anguish, whatever grief and pain, we are experiencing as we watch the horrors exacted from one human being on another, that the hurt welling up from within our creator God surely must surpass any and all emotion that we can muster. We, as saintly as any one of us might be, continue to be a work in progress, the events now unfolding on the world stage proof positive that we have yet to fully evolve as a species. God grant us grace for this nightmarish journey. May God's reign come on earth among all your saints, saints of every persuasion, and may your love prevail until your gracious mercy and perpetual peace shine in the darkness of our demoralizingly demented behavior. God forgive our complicitness, any of the potential ways we have fueled the destructive behavior in our world, whatever roles we might have played, either benignly or intentionally. For such a time as this, and at all times, God be with us, all of us!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and call us to love, making us all saints in the process. Amen and amen.

