

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“On the Job Training: Practicing Love”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
May 1, 2016

Leviticus 19:9-18
John 13:31-35

It was unnerving. They were screaming and yelling and I was totally unnerved by it. I was in the sixth grade and my family had moved to a new neighborhood and I had moved to a new school. I was fortunate enough to have made a couple of friends and was over visiting my friend Keith. I couldn't tell you what we were doing but in the background I could hear two people's voices beginning to rise. At first it was a mild annoyance and then it grew louder and louder until they were shouting. What made it even more unnerving was that it was Keith's parents. They were arguing, yelling at each other at the top of their lungs. What you have to realize is that I came from a home where no one ever raised their voices. The only two times my father ever did so was when I did something that, well, deserved for him to speak sternly. So with great trepidation I asked something like, “Are they going to be OK?” Keith looked at me matter-of-factly and said, “Oh their fine. We're Italian.”

This was my first lesson in that every family is different; that every family has their own traditions and their own relational DNA. And the same was true for Jesus and his disciples. As first century Jews they had grown up with their own family traditions and they had their own religious DNA. One piece of that tradition was the command to love neighbor as thyself. You could hear that concept in the reading from Leviticus this morning. And not only could you hear it but you could sense what that meant. One did not show partiality in administering justice. One shared what one had with the poor. One did not lie. This loving neighbor tradition was one that did not end in the Torah, but could be found in the writings and the prophets. It was a core strand of Jewish DNA. In the time of Jesus this could best be seen in that most communities had a social welfare organization that worked to insure that widows had enough to eat. So when in the Upper Room, Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another, he was not plowing new ground. He was however asking them to up their game. He was asking them to not only do the usual in loving neighbor, but within the community, they were to sacrificially serve one another...as he had when he washed their feet.

The amazing thing about this new commandment, was that the disciples actually listened. In fact, they listened so well that the early church became known as the Beloved Community. They shared what they had with one another. They made sure that everyone had enough. And this sense of being a sacrificially loving community was what drew people to the church. Folks in the Roman Empire were not used to people caring for anyone to whom they were not related. And so a community in which all persons were loved, regardless of gender or social standing was amazing. But as you might guess, this sense of the Beloved Community did not last long. Within a hundred years the church had moved away from being a sacrificially loving community and had become an organization; an organization complete with rules, regulations, practices and a hierarchy based on that of the Roman Empire. And over the

ensuing centuries it only got worse. And in fact the one job I have currently with the Presbytery, the larger church, is not to head a committee intended to create a Beloved Community, but one that insures the Presbytery fulfills its goal and objectives.

What then are we supposed to do with this command that Jesus has given that we sacrificially love one another? My response is that we ought to try to reclaim it. We ought to try to reclaim it because it is part of our tradition, stretching back beyond Christ. We ought to try to reclaim it because it is part of our Jesus DNA. We ought to try to reclaim it because it is a command of Jesus. And we ought to try to reclaim it because it is part of the vision that we believe God has given us, that as Everybody's Church we commit ourselves to serving Christ by cultivating mission (which we do well), inclusion (which we do very well) and community (which we don't do well enough). How will we do this? I'm not sure. What will a 21st Century Beloved Community look like? I'm not sure. What I do know, what I believe, is that we are called to reclaim this part of our tradition and to allow our DNA to drive our community.

This coming weekend the session will begin to wrestle with this idea of Beloved Community; what is it? what does it look like? How should we strive to create it? What they and we need, is your help in this process. Two weeks ago many of you filled out a survey about your experience of community here at First Church. What we are asking you to do is to take a short more in-depth survey with several narrative questions. We are asking this because we believe that our vision for the Beloved Community is not something that I can discern alone, or the session can discern alone, but it is something that should be a vision arising from the entire congregation.

My challenge then to each of you is to go to the website, take the survey and help us discover God's vision for what it means to be the Beloved Community in Birmingham in the 21st Century.