

“Awe, Walk, Love, Serve” based on 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26 and Deuteronomy 10:12-22

I believe that God loves all people unconditionally, completely, and uniquely. It might make sense, even, to say that I think God loves all people unfathomably – that it is more love than any of us could ever even begin to comprehend. A few times in my life I've had a sense that scales have been lifted from my eyes so that I can catch a tiny glimpse of how much God loves God's people, and it has blown me away.

My friend the Rev. Dr. Barbara Thorington Green has theorized that Jesus's healings were simply this: that Jesus was able to see people and love people as a reflection of God's knowing and seeing them and being loved like that healed. I still haven't decided if I agree with her, but I think she makes an excellent point. God's love is that big, that powerful, and that wonderful.

This is the starting point for everything I believe about God. It is the thing I am most sure of, and everything else is secondary. However, those secondary things flow pretty readily from the first. If God loves all of us this much, then God wants us to live good, full, abundant lives – with meaningful contributions, full of beauty, and defined by deep connections. Then it means that God has a lot of balancing to do between various people and peoples with various needs at any given time, and that means that the particular work needing to be done is wide, varied, and not all parts are equally obvious to all of us. A final secondary point before we move on to tertiary ones 😊;) - I believe that God's PRIMARY way of working in the world is through people who are aligned with God's vision. That isn't meant to limit God or God's actions, just that it is the primary way God acts.

For me, this moves quickly to another set of conclusions: then there are things getting in the way of what God wants for God's beloved people (*everyone). Clearly God doesn't want any of God's people starving, so anything that results in starvation is against God's desires. I can draw similar conclusions about slavery, about abuse, about rape and murder, about war, and the list starts getting pretty long.

One word that I know that seems to encompass the way I think God wants the world to be so that all of God's people can be thriving with good, full, abundant lives is: justice. Or, at least, that's what I mean when I say justice. *Justice is working toward good, full, abundant lives for all of God's people.* It sometimes means supporting great things that are happening; it sometimes means learning about complicated realities in order to understand them; it sometimes means slowing down and making sure we're living

those good, full, abundant lives so that we are signs of hope and centered in God to make a difference; it sometimes means slowing down to connect with God or each other or beauty; and it sometimes means naming what isn't fair or right in the world so as to work towards what is fair and right.

Nevertheless, the work of justice is the work of living God's love for God's people. Often, it involves trying to support and empower the most vulnerable people. God's energy seems like it is often focused on transforming the lives most desperately in need of change.

Now, this all fits in with today's passage, which clearly states that God cares about vulnerable people and that God expects those of us who are in relationship with the Divine to care about vulnerable people too. When this was first proposed though, it was radical rather than obvious.

The neighboring traditions of ancient Israel thought that the gods cared about ... well, themselves: about being sacrificed to, praised, and cajoled. Moses really may have been the first one to figure out that God cared about how we treat each other.

During Lent we are examining God's vision for justice, how we see it in the Bible, how we can feel its urgings now, and what that means for our lives. Last week we examined Genesis 1, the priestly creation story, and heard within it faith statements of the priests. They believed they served the God of Sabbath, who built into creation itself a rhythm of rest and justice. They articulated that God's rest on the 7th day of creation was meant to create a rhythm of rest for all of creation, in particular rest for Israelites and those who served them. The equal access to rest is the beginning of God's intention of distributive justice, and those priests thought it was built into creation itself.

This week we are examining the Torah's vision for a just society in a passage Walter Brueggemann subtitles "Imitations of a Caring God." It starts with a question familiar to us from Micah, but this one asks in the communal, the plural: what does God require of US? The answer is pretty similar to the know we know too. Micah answers, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8b NRSV). Deuteronomy answers, "to stand in awe of YHWH; that you *walk* in God's ways, that you *love and serve* God..." and then goes on to say that it also involves keeping the commandments. Those commandments are the ones that envision a just society where all are cared for, thus they're also about "doing justice" and "loving kindness." Deuteronomy also reminds the people that the commandments and decrees are "for your own well-being." This God that they were serving was one who wanted good for

them, *all of them*. God's dream was for a society that could show the world how to live together so all could thrive.

Walter Brueggemann summarizes this passage as “is a *summons* to be fully Torah people of YHWH, supported by a series of *motivations*.”¹ The motivations are ALL descriptions of God, and the commandments seem to be to follow in God's ways. God is the God of heaven and earth, the text says, but God chose to specially love you and work with you!! Because of this, you can trust God and follow God's ways.

God is a God of power, might, and fairness! God doesn't take bribes. God “executes justice” for the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger by providing food and clothing. Because of this, and because God took care of you when you were strangers in Egypt, YOU should LOVE the stranger!

Brueggemann puts it this way, “YHWH cares about the specificities of justice and the victims of injustice. This is a God who cannot be bribed by the wealthy and powerful but who attends to the needs and wishes of orphans and strangers, who cares about the concrete implementation of justice that has to do with the elemental requirements of food and clothing.”² This moves onto a commandment for Israel, the one to love the stranger. This, too, might sound obvious, but really isn't.

He says, “*Israel is not permitted to become a homogeneous, ethnic community turned in on itself, but is mandated, as a part of its most elemental responsibility, to reach beyond itself to those who do not quite belong, who are unlike Israel, but who are committed to life in a community of obedience.*”³ He also notices that we usually hear about the Israelites being SLAVES in Egypt, but this talks about strangers. He has an explanation for it, “We are accustomed to think of Israelites as slaves. It is important, however, to remember that their status as slaves was an economic development from the vulnerable status as aliens and outsiders, because unprotected sojourners are almost certain to become economic slaves.”⁴ (131) So, God took care of them and thus, “Israel's distinctive covenantal work, in response, is the economic practice of hospitality and justice that will prevent other vulnerable outsiders from sliding into the wretchedness of slavery through indebtedness.” (132)

This is a huge deal, although it might not appear to be at first. In most societies, or tribes, or groups of people, there is a stronger requirement to care for insiders than for outsiders. Strangers and outsiders are allowed to be vulnerable, while the insiders say “we have to take care of ourselves first.” Perhaps this is best seen by looking at the concept of nations themselves, and how they treat their own citizens vs. people who aren't their citizens (at home or abroad). This moral code in the Torah though, doesn't allow for it. This moral code requires that the people who follow this God of the

Strangers find ways to protect OUTSIDERS. They don't get to do "us first" policies. Their God, who is the God of all people, may have special work for them to do, but that doesn't mean that God allows them to ignore the needs of others. *They have to find the ways to care for themselves and others at the same time, no matter how hard it is.* They don't get to take advantage of anyone, because their God isn't a God who takes advantage.

The widows and orphans are "brought justice" by God as well. Widows and orphans were "insiders" but ones without resources or recourse. They didn't have an adult male with full status in society to care for them, but according to this passage, God's own self steps in to execute the justice they need. God serves as the one who is missing for them – but in reality, this is also what God is asking of the people in the society they create: *may even those without an advocate have enough.*

And may that be true because of who your God is, and what your God has done.

All of this talk of who God is, and what God is working toward, seems to me to raise some questions about our work. We know that we are about building the kingdom of God, or alternative language options: about sharing God's love in the world, or about taking care of God's vulnerable people, or about creating justice for God in the world. (All the same thing, as far as I know.) But I wonder what our particular part in it is.

1 Corinthians 12 draws a wonderful metaphor about the work of individuals in the Body of Christ: that we are to do our part, and do it well, and trust other parts to do their work also, without assuming any part is more important than any other. It might also be a way of saying: work to your strengths, and trust that God spread the strengths around well. 😊;) It works within this Body of Christ.

However, I think the metaphor applies more broadly. If The United Methodist Church, OR the Church Universal are all working together as The Body of Christ towards building the kingdom, what is this church community's role in it? (Btw, I could easily expand further to mention people of other faith traditions, as I think we're working together there too, but I don't want to force Body of Christ imagery on them.)

It seems to me there could be a lot of possible answers. We might be the head – we're good at thinking deeply. We might be the conscious, we're good at seeing what is right and calling for it. We might be the feet, we're good at showing up where we are needed. We might be the hands, we work well at sharing God's love by handing people tangible gifts. My best guess (and I offer this with humility as I'm really not certain) is that we might be the heart – filled both with expansive love for God's people AND

broken by the ways God's people are harmed. (Just not the cheesy kind of heart, we'd hate being the cheesy kind.)

In any case, I wonder if it is time for us to work together to what our role is. It is my suspicion that being as clear as it is possible to be about what God calls us to together will help us do it more effectively! (First step in this is to fill out the survey that was emailed out and will be handed out later...) What is our role in sharing God's love and caring for God's people? May God help us listen well, and find clarity in our shared answer, so we can do it and do it well! Amen

¹Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 129.

²Brueggemann, 130-131.

³Brueggemann, 131.

⁴Brueggemann, 131.

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Pronouns: she/her/hers

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