

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year A
October 29, 2023**

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Five years ago, during the Calvary Bazaar, the doors of the church were open wide in welcome. The Bazaar is an incarnate, local way of putting our faith in action. We love and serve God by loving and serving our neighbors. Thank you to all those who make it possible each year.

The event generates about \$25,000 that is shared with the those in need in the community. It brings together numerous church volunteers who know or learn that serving can be its own transformative gift. The week of preparation and day of the Bazaar are an occasion to bond as a community and enjoy being together to do something good.

Like every Bazaar before it, hundreds of people and parishioners came through our doors and gathered... smiling, mingling, serving, and looking for a good deal. That day was like all the others before it in most respects with a buzzing vibrancy and expectations.

I was standing in the corner of the crowded parish hall with someone trying to sell me a tie even though I have not worn a necktie now in 27 years. The collar does the trick. Then waves, from multiple starting points, rippled throughout the room. The smiles morphed into expressions that varied from disbelief to horror to shock until everyone heard the news from whispers or reading a phone over hunched shoulders. Someone had attacked a synagogue less than a mile away on Shady Avenue. After we understood what was happening, we invited the people inside safely behind locked doors.

Everyone around the world soon knew what happened down the street in Pittsburgh. Our communal response as city and congregation, to the worst Anti-Semitic attack in US history, was to open our doors and open our hearts. That's what it meant to love our neighbors as ourselves in that moment with that need.

Rabbi Jeff Myers said every time someone asks him about that day or there is another mass shooting or another attack on Jews... it feels like the scab is ripped off exposing the pain all over again. There has not been enough healing to form a scar yet. While not ranking trauma, our entire culture seems to lurch from a war or pandemic or crazy thing after another without enough time of healing to form scars.

That is exhausting and not the vision for a redemptive and eternal life to which God calls and offers us. Fear and anxiety, consciously or not, cause us to close the doors of our hearts and minds so we are not overwhelmed. Hate, and the acts that follow, are much more likely to arise when we feel threatened or unsafe.

How can we respond in faith rather than through fear in today's world? First, make the problem or issue manageable at a scale with which you can relate. Make it human-sized to you. There is not a person in here who can fight Anti-Semitism or Islamaphobia in the middle east. You can't solve the current crises around the world in Israel or Ukraine or Taiwan or wherever. I am *not* drawing a moral equivalency here for all "sides." I *am* saying these macro problems, all at once, are far too much for you to solve or even think about clearly because there are far too many.

What can you do when you feel overwhelmed? Make the issue or problem manageable, local, and particular. If you want to change the world, start with yourself. It is the only place to make a lasting difference. With age, hopefully, grows the wisdom that we cannot control the past or future or anyone else so why waste time trying? We can be responsible for ourselves and family at this very moment and a lifetime of moments. What is the next right thing I can do right now?

You can change the world for good but only by first changing yourself. That is at the heart of Jesus's message. Over and over people asked him what is most important thing in life? Of all the commandments in the Bible, which one is the greatest? What did he say? "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

To love God means to walk through a door in faith when it is presented to you. What is the next right thing I can do right now? When your aim, your orientation, your energy are directed towards God, the legion of problems become less of an overwhelming series of emergencies. It's not that you don't care or they are not important but just don't worry about controlling them all. Your soul and mind become clearer to live out your faith and not be distracted by every new shiny or scary object that appears to compete for your attention.

The second part of the commandment is the main way we express the first. To love our neighbor as ourselves means to open a door and open your heart to someone in the moment of need. A great theologian, Rabbi Aaron Bisno's mother, said putting her faith in action to change the world feels like trying to clean Mt. Rushmore with a toothbrush.

From our Jewish friends, I learned that it is not our task to complete the job of repairing the world with God but to be faithful in doing it. In our case, it was to open a door to welcome those who are in need. That can be to a Jewish congregation that had been displaced through violence. It could be to welcome people, year after year, to the Calvary Bazaar. They are both ways of loving and serving God through loving and serving our neighbors. They are good but do they change the world?

Let me offer another congregational example. On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Calvary will sponsor the third year of a Faith Night at the Hunt Armory. The evening is a free evening of ice skating sponsored by the Pittsburgh Penguins. There is nothing unusual about that.

What is a rare witness is that we will have Jews, Muslims, and Christians gathered together on purpose. Every religious group agreed to participate *after* the war in Israel began. This is an intentional gathering as friends... so people, primed to be enemies, can see each other as human beings created in the image of God. How often do you see Muslims, Jews, and Christians gathered to have fun being together? Will that change the world?

A final example is at a personal scale that anyone can do. Several years ago, a Calvary parishioner was on vacation and visited a little church on the shore. Near the entrance, there was a simple basket with small, wooden crosses with a note inviting people to take one. They are often called "pocket crosses." The idea is that you keep one in your pocket or purse. Every time you touch the cross, getting your keys or something, it reminds you to ask "What is the next right thing I can do right now?"

She returned to Pittsburgh and implemented the same idea here. We now give away about 750 of these crosses every year. Each one says, "Love one another." It is not magic or a good luck charm. The cross is a reorienting reminder to make the best choice, in this moment, despite the barrage of distractions... to love God by loving one another.

The story does not end there. When the Tree of Life congregation returned to Calvary last month for their high holidays, we made the decision to cancel our morning worship on one Sunday to open a door to those in need and have one church service that night. While that was inconvenient... not one Calvary member complained. That is a testament to the faith in action of this community.

The woman, who had the crosses made, realized on that day that our Jewish neighbors might also appreciate a small reorienting reminder to put their faith in action. So she called the company that made the crosses, told them our story of Jewish friends, and commissioned a Star of David with the word Shalom or Peace in the middle. The idea of the pocket crosses and Stars of David is so good it made it into the USA Today newspaper on Friday.

Does opening the doors to a congregation in need counter antisemitism? Does offering an annual Bazaar year after year heal the creation? Does hosting a night of skating with Muslims, Jews, and Christians proclaim that all people are created in God's image? Does one, anonymous church lady making a small reminder change the world for good? Does a sip of wine and a morsel of bread transport you to the presence of the holy? Maybe they all do. They all have a ripple effect over time as they touch other people starting with you.

What is the next right thing I can do right now?

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