

Sermon: On Making Things Right
Scripture: Leviticus 16 and Romans 5
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: September 27, 2020

Thank you Carolyn and Brian... and here's to the various ecumenical and interfaith couples in our church that give color and depth to our life together as a congregation, those like Brian and Carolyn and Susan and Andy who read last week, bringing together in relationship the Jewish and Christian faiths. And there are Catholic and Protestant couples among us doing the same. There are Christian and atheist couples. There are mixed race couples in our midst. Maybe most hard to fathom are the couples among us who are Democrat and Republican! Our hats are off to you these days! And we lift up those who are loving one another across traditional and current lines of division and separation. As my teacher and friend Rabbi Michael Shevack once said of his interfaith marriage and Tracy and my ecumenical marriage (since Tracy is Catholic) – “Will, while the world is arguing fine points of ecclesiology that separate us and while we're killing one another over our little differences, God's just patiently breeding away the problem by marrying Jews to Christians and Catholics to Protestants, and Christians to Muslims...may it be so... and may we make amends for the ways we've hurt and separated ourselves one from another, by learning better to love one another.

Speaking of making amends... the Jewish holy observances moving from Rosh Hashanah, the new year celebration, through 10 days culminating in Yom Kippur is occurring right now. It is a time of life review, of introspection, of acknowledging the ways they've gone astray and making amends where possible. It all culminates this evening and tomorrow with Yom Kippur, the Day of

Atonement, as that life review, repentance and making amends has the ultimate goal of returning to God through atonement, which is exactly what it looks like, atonement, At-One-Ment, becoming one again with God who is our source, purpose and destination.

Ahh, if only we were all required to stop right about now and do some that work, asking ourselves where we've gotten off track, where we've done wrong, to recognize the sins that block us from God and one another, and where we can make amends to make it right, from here. Another group that takes this on in a BIG way are those in addiction recovery, in AA and NA and the related groups, with the 12 step program. What steps 8, 9, and 10 ask of them is the seeking of atonement. Here's step 8 – "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all." They see this not just as a good thing to do but a central part of what they have to do to save their lives. And then they move on to the next step, Step 9, which is acting on the list, then – "made direct amends to such people, except where to do so would cause more harm to them or others." And you think after that harrowing work, they'd be good to go but then Step 10 follows – "continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong to promptly admit it." This is the humble and powerful work of those who have been brought to their knees by trying to justify themselves and finally are willing to look at their own powerlessness and their own failings, not shamefully but as the path back to life and at-one-ment.

One of the founders of AA was a Jesuit priest, steeped in the Christian practice of confession which comes directly out of the Jewish practice of atoning for sins, and these both as ways of returning to God. There's talk and laughter at times about Jewish guilt or Catholic guilt and which is more potent, but the truth

of the matter is that a guilty conscience is a very special gift offered to us in the West through our Jewish roots. In fact the whole notion that we can be introspective about where we've gone wrong and work through time to improve and become better, comes to us from the Jews. Out of the east comes the spiritual practices of accepting what is, embracing the now, being mindful, and while such can be an important spiritual practice, for sure, our spiritual inheritance requires acknowledging our sin, repenting, working to make things right in an effort to make things better. That's the work of atonement. That's the work of confession. That's the work of recovery. And mighty powerful work it is.

At-one-ment. Sin, as Paul Tillich wrote, is separation from God. Mythically, it is the human being naked in the garden of Eden suddenly ashamed of themselves and hiding from God. And it's God, not full of wrath punishing them, but brokenhearted making garments for them – Genesis 3:21 - and letting them know the consequences of their actions. Because there ARE consequences to our actions in this world and words and actions that aren't aligned to love cause harm to and separation from ourselves and others and the earth itself. It's just the truth of the matter, the way God made the world to be. Honest guilt for such sins is good and appropriate, guilt for what we've done at times... but being careful not to fall from there into shame for who we are. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, for sure, but we are all beloved of God above all else. Shame on the church for emphasizing the sinner part and de-emphasizing the beloved part such that shame and neurosis results in many people rather than simply honest sense of guilt and then being loved towards change.

Because an honest review of any of our lives will reveal plenty for us to feel guilty about and that's just right, when it lead to making amends and change in

our lives and don't we all want to improve and grow in our lives and don't we all want to improve our society and have a sense that we are growing as a people towards a more just and loving collective? That's the work of atonement and from a Jewish context it's specifically and particularly communal in its work – we atone together and we make amends together and we come back into one-ness with God together. Just like in Christian worship we confess together, acknowledging that none of us don't need to confess, we all need it, no need to pretend otherwise, no need to present ourselves as better than that, no need to compete in this to justify ourselves cause ultimately that's God's work of grace that does that. Right?

The rituals required from Aaron in the atonement rite as described in the Book of Leviticus that Brian read for us is a communal rite that Aaron was given by God to do on behalf of the Hebrew people to bring them back into right relationship with God. As Christians we believe that the communal rite of atonement and that ultimately justifies us is the grace given by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and that too is not just for us individually but for humanity as a collective. The danger in both offerings is in thinking its done and there's no more work for us because voila we're saved. But it's in witnessing that suffering love that we are strengthened, encouraged, inspired ideally towards acts of atoning love ourselves. We are still in process, with the end now known but the journey still to be embraced...

And this is obvious because there are wrongs in our society that we must work to make right for our neighbor's sake, for our own sake, for the sake of creation. But it's gotta come out of an experience of love not of shame. It's not you should be doing more, you are bad, shame on you. It's look how we are off-

base, look how we are hurting one another, a society where white bodies are protected from violence and by the law more than black bodies, is not a safe society. A world where we use and abuse the planet for our purposes leads to the use and abuse of one another too. If we are not taking care of the most vulnerable among us in clear and obvious ways then we are living in a careless society that will have consequences for us all. God asks more from us not because God is a demanding and exacting judge and “you better shape up or ship out...” but because God loves us and knows what is needed, knows what is good for us.

So review your life. Take an inventory of your relationships. Note the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. Make amends where you can without causing more harm. When you're wrong promptly admit it. Enter into relationship with those on the other side, whatever other side that may be and learn through that what it means to be one through our differences. These aren't the demands of an angry God but the invitations of a God of love. It's the work of our lives. And it's a love story, not an exam. It's a courtship not a competition. It's a dance not a battle. Yes, the swaying this way and that way, the ups and downs, the twists and turns, the getting off course and the return again, is the dance that our beloved invites us into... take God's hand and let God take the lead...