

The Persons We Would Be
Deuteronomy 6:1-13; Leviticus 19:18
Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:34-40

“Keep these words I am commanding you this day in your heart....”

Of all the stories to make the headlines this week, the story of the release of 1000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for one Israeli soldier on Tuesday left many casual observers puzzled. Why would Benjamin Netanyahu, of all people, make such a deal? Some connected the move with the Arab Spring; others with the Israeli army's commitment never to leave a wounded soldier behind; still others took Gilad Shalit to be a symbol of every child in a nation of universal military service. All these things may have played a part, but the underlying reason, wrote Samuel Freedman in yesterday's New York Times religion column, is no mystery to those steeped in Jewish Scripture, rabbinic commentaries and legal codes: 1000 were released in exchange for one because God has commanded the redemption of captives.

“Where in Scripture does God command this?” an inquiring Presbyterian might want to know. To begin at the beginning, the story of Lot's rescue from his captors by Abraham in the Book of Genesis “represents the earliest of a series of examples of the concept of ‘pidyon shvuyim’”—of redemption, invariably at a cost. “Far from being some abstruse, obscure point of theology,” Freedman goes on to say, “pidyon shvuyim is called in the Talmud a ‘mitzvah rabbah,’ a great commandment.” At the heart of the commandment is the high value of an individual human life that trumps even the sustaining of the poor and clothing them, according to a 16th century legal code. And though modern day Israelis are not strict followers of religious law, apparently redemption is part of the DNA of the culture. “It's a sentiment that can't be measured in exact legal or judicial terms,” said Moshe Halbertal, a philosophy professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “It plays a role in those moments of perplexity. You fall back on your basic identity. As a Jew, as an Israeli, what do I do?”

In this present moment of perplexity, with manifold encampments of the fearful and the frustrated symbolically occupying Wall Street across the globe, a nadir of leadership in every sphere of this society, and an economic recovery held captive by party politics, I find myself wondering if the Great Commandment is a part of our basic identity in any way anybody would notice? Or do we, who love so many other things, even have an imagination for the persons we would be if we were to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, strength and our neighbor as ourselves? If we take these questions to be the questions raised by our Scripture readings in the face of the world's current perplexity, then the issue before us this morning would seem to be an issue of ethics, of

theological reflection on what we, as believers in Jesus Christ and members of his church, are to do and to be.

At the start, a distinction needs to be drawn between ethics and morality. The meaning of the word *ethics* comes from a Greek word that originally meant “dwelling” or “stall”, *mos* when translated into Latin, which is the root of the English word “morality”. Ethics has to do with the “stability and the security which are necessary if one is going to act at all,” wrote Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann, while morality has to do with the behavior based on this secure foundation. Ethics, he continues, refers to behavior according to reason and morality to behavior according to custom. Finally, says Lehmann, “To put [the matter] somewhat too sharply..., *Christian ethics is oriented toward revelation and not toward morality.*”

I take this to mean, in the first place, that the one standing before the lawyer in Matthew and before the scribe in Mark is the revelation of the promise of what *human* being and *being* human looks like. We spend so much of our reason wrestling with whether or how it could be that God was in Christ that we often fail to notice in him the revelation of the person we would be if, in perplexing times, our identity fell back on his love. Yet even if, in extremis, we should glimpse something of our lost and forgotten selves in him, the temptation to which religion succumbs in perplexing times is the temptation to move immediately from revelation to morality, customary rules being more able to curb the enthusiasm of human behavior than reasonable reflection.

Therefore, we scan the gospels in order to codify, from the words and actions of a first century Jew, a concrete set of moral imperatives or religious norms to enact within or even impose upon the social order in his name. We do this, in part, because the complexity of being human in any given situation--requiring our heart, soul, mind and strength, requiring our complete attention--is something we are not able to muster due to the many other practical gods that would have-at-us in the course of a day. Supposing principles and rules (ideologies and pledges in these latter days) to be more helpful when it comes to becoming the person we would be, more doable than doing business with the revelation of the living God in the person of Jesus Christ, we live in the calculated more or less.

But if, in the first place, Christian ethics—reasonable reflection on the persons we would be--has to do with revelation and not with morality—then we would do well simply to seek the company of him who alone loved God and neighbor with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength. No doubt our seeking will find us, uncomfortably and uncharacteristically, among those judged to be immoral by the moral customs of the day; which is to say, he who was born in a stall to an unwed mother, he who came to dwell with the poor and the lowly, dwells there still. If ethics is a stall, a stable, “the stability and the security which are necessary if we are going to act at all” then it is in

the stable places that we are destined to come face to face with the person we would be, with the one born to give his life for the many.

Then in the second place, Paul Lehmann tells us that “*Christian ethics aims, not at morality, but at maturity.*” You know well the sentence that instructs us to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” a sentence that, had it ended there, would lead us to believe the aim of Christian ethics is the maturation of the individual, the salvation of a singular soul. But the verse goes on to say we are to grow up into a body and be knit together into a community that, when it is working properly, upbuilds itself in love. To dwell in Christ’s church, whose basic identity, in moments of perplexity, properly falls back on the self-giving love revealed in him, is to dwell in the stability that is necessary if one is to act at all. If you have any doubts about this, do not miss Brian’s video this morning of last summer’s Youth Mission Trip, of young people dwelling in the stability that is necessary if they are to become the persons they would be.

But do not miss, as well, the daunting and demanding implication hidden in Lehmann’s second understanding of Christian ethics. It is the coincidence between the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and the love made known to the world in the body of Christ that is the church. “The incarnate, resurrected and ascended Christ has no real presence in the world,” he writes, “apart from this fellowship-creating relationship....” That is to say, Christ is present in the world as we love one another, giving our life away, our sum and substance, without counting the cost. Christian ethics aims at this sort of maturity: growing up and acting out of a community, a space, a stall, a stability, an abundance of self-giving love. “See how Christians love one another!” said astonished pagans in the third century according to Tertullian. What they saw were men, women and children [likely outcasts from polite Roman society] who emptied themselves as Christ emptied himself—heart, soul, mind, strength and substance.

Such maturity is almost unimaginable in this society! These days, the temptation is to define love as affection for and association with those who believe the same things we believe. Need I remind you how childish the human animal acts when associating only with its own kind, how pigheaded the likeminded can be? Such associations not only characterize our politics but also typify the righteous divisions that have been the lot of dwindling mainline denominations, including our own. Lehmann calls this the “pathological immaturity of the church” and juxtaposes this behavior to “what God is working at in the world...that sooner or later, come what may, [will accomplish] the promise and prospect of maturity.”

Whether or not the visible church is the place of God’s working in the world--is the community in history

where God will accomplish the promise and prospect of maturity—is never a given because “The [only] difference between believers and non-believers,” says Lehmann, “is the matter of...behavior that is expressive of confidence and hope as against anxiety and despair, of behaving with abandon rather than with calculation, of being all things to all [people] rather than...pursuing selfish advantage...compiling statistics of evil.”

To tell the truth, we in the visible church are those who live in what Reinhold Niebuhr called the "nicely calculated less and more" where "human happiness is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters life and understands the interests of the neighbor." To our nicely calculated more or less, to all of the possible possibilities by which we live, Jesus commands the impossible possibility and bids us become who we are in him.

“Whatever happened to the passion we all had to improve ourselves, live up to our potential, leave a mark on the world?” asks Wallace Stegner’s narrator in *Crossing to Safety*. “Our hottest arguments,” he recalls, “were always about how we could *contribute*. We did not care about the rewards. We were young and earnest. We never kidded ourselves that we had the political gifts to reorder society or insure social justice. Beyond a basic minimum, money was not a goal we respected. Some of us suspected that money wasn’t even very good for people....But we all hoped, in whatever way our capacities permitted, to define and illustrate the worthy life....[To] leave a mark on the world. Instead,” concludes Stegner’s character, “the world has left marks on us. We got older. Life chastened us so that now we lie waiting to die, or walk on canes, or sit on porches where once the young juices flowed strongly, and feel old and inept and confused.” Who were the persons we set out to be?

For those whose lives have been broken into enough pieces, we only know enough to know that our hope and humanity dwells in him who has loved us completely; that in him the persons we will become are persons redeemed by a love that has turned pidyon shvuyim inside out. It is a love revealed not in 1000 lives given for the ransom of one but one life given for the ransom of all, one life sent to rescue every child of God from life without him, one life in whose love none will finally be far from the kingdom. Let us together, by his grace, live in that love, heart and soul, mind and strength. Thanks be to God.