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kNOw Justice, kNOw Peace

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When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 22.34-40 (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*)

It's important to hear this text in the context of then **and** in the context of now. In the context of then, Yeshua ben Joseph, Jesus—who Christians call the Christ—is Mary's baby grown up. He's a handyman, like his father, Joseph, but, also, an itinerant rabbi. He's Jewish, he's not a Christian. He is not a Christian.

He's born in Bethlehem of Judea, which is now Palestine. He's raised in Nazareth, in Galilee, which is now Palestine. He's a Palestinian Jew, descendant of David. He is an Afro-Semitic human being. A particular body in a particular flesh. Read the genealogies and find the Africans in it. He is a Palestinian Jew who is Afro-Semitic.

In this text, he's not having an argument with Christians about what it means to be faithful. He's having an interreligious conversation with his people—Jewish people—about what it means to be faithful. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are not his enemies by nature. The scribes are not his enemies by nature.

He's having conversations with his disciples, who don't get it. He's having conversations with the Pharisees, who don't get it. He's having conversations with the Sadducees, who don't get it. He's having conversations with the scribes, who don't get it. They don't understand what he's up to.

He is poorer than they are. He is less learned than they are. He has fewer degrees than they do. And he is preaching radically good news. Jesus wasn't a Christian, but he was preaching radical good news.

He's saying, “You've heard it said, but I say...”

He's saying, “Love your enemies, pray for them.”

He's saying, “Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.”

And in this text, where he's been arguing with his disciples and arguing with the Sadducees and arguing with the Pharisees about what it means to be faithful, they think they're going to trap him. They think they're going to catch him blaspheming. They're hoping he might say the wrong thing.

Now, my favorite thing to say about Jesus is that he's a rule-breaker. And he is. But, right now, Matthew sets the stage to say that Jesus is exactly the right Messiah—exegete, expositor, preacher, healer—at exactly the right time who is saying exactly the right stuff. Matthew wants us to observe the Jewish Jesus having arguments and saying all the right stuff to his people about faithfulness.

“Teacher, which one of these is the greatest commandment?”

Jesus refuses to get boxed in.

“Well, that first commandment is love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind. That's the first one. And the second one is just like it. You will love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus puts Leviticus and Deuteronomy together. You will love God with everything. And you loving God with everything has absolutely nothing of merit if you're not also loving your neighbor as yourself.

He puts the two together. He won't be simple. He puts the two together and says this is what it means to be faithful.

Did Jesus really mean love your neighbor? Which neighbor? Who's your neighbor? That was the question then, and it is a question now.

When Jesus is asked who his neighbor is, Luke tells us the story about the Good Samaritan. Here's what love of neighbor looks like. The Samaritan—a person the Jewish people of the day considered outsiders—takes care of a random dude on the road. That's love of neighbor. The outsider showing you what it means to be inside love.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us what it looks like to love neighbor in chapter 25. Did you see them hungry? Did you see them naked? Did you see them in prison? Did you see them sick? Did you visit them? Did you feed them? Did you clothe them? When you take care of the least of these, it's as if you were doing it for me. Jesus was real practical about neighbor love.

This call to love neighbor is a call to love everybody—all the neighbors, even the strangers. How do we know this? Because the Hebrew scriptures—Jesus' text—says, “You shall love the stranger, because you were once strangers in a strange land. How many times does the Bible say this? *At least 37 times* in the Hebrew Scriptures, when the command to love your neighbor occurs only once. Jesus means for us to love all the people. Including the stranger. Including the strangest one. Love the stranger—then and now. Love your enemy—then and now. Love the stranger with whom you have the most enmity—then and now.

Those people today who are at war with each other in the Middle East? They are all Jesus' people. They are Palestinian like Jesus. They are Jewish like Jesus. They are Middle Eastern like Jesus. They are outsiders like Jesus. They are his people. I want to make sure we understand that if we're going to follow the marginalized, homeless, refugee, handyman, rabbi...if we're going to follow Jesus, we're following a Palestinian Jew. And those people are his people. Which makes them our people. They are all our neighbors.

Those Jewish people whose families were ravaged on October 7, they're our neighbors. The ones whose families are kidnapped and are still in captivity, they're our neighbors. The Palestinians who are in Gaza with no electricity and no water and no light and no safety net, they're our neighbors.

Hamas is our neighbor. Netanyahu is our neighbor. Biden is our neighbor.

Lord, have mercy on the neighborhood.

What do we do when our neighbors are in trouble? What do we do when our neighbors cause trouble? We can't be quiet. We don't get to be quiet because the violence is over there and not right here. We don't get to be quiet because we might get canceled when we speak up.

Here's the truth — they're all our neighbors. They don't deserve violence; they all deserve love, a homeland, and peace.

Love calls us into all kinds of spaces to speak powerful truths—even when they're unpopular. Love calls us into places to speak the truth—even when it's uncomfortable and causes conflict.

Because we love hard, we must make hard requests of President Biden, other elected officials, and other leaders. We can demand a ceasefire. We must demand a ceasefire. We don't have to keep voting for people who believe violence is an answer. Because we don't believe violence is an answer. And we've got the power. Call your elected officials. Write that letter. Do not sit there and watch the world go to hell. Jesus exemplified for us going into the tough places. He argued with the authorities, he made his points, he spoke his truth.

Let me share another thought here, something that we get to be part of. We get to liberate God from the box we've put him in, I say "him" because that God in this box is a "he." We get to liberate God into an active partner in healing the world. We get to liberate God from our bad theology. We get to say to ourselves, our children, in our communities: "God is still speaking."

So, what is God saying right now? God is telling us to love all the people. An old word with a new twist. Love all the people. Dr. King tells us that "love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love." But that is not truth.

What we need is a realization that, in his words, "Power without love is reckless and abusive. Love without power is sentimental and anemic." We need both power and love. We need both a fierce demand for justice and tender loving care.

The truth will set us free. The truth will give us love that leads to peace. The kind of peace is not merely the absence of tension but is also the presence of justice. We cannot expect peace during oppression. We cannot expect peace when people don't have food on the table. We cannot expect peace when people can't survive.

I am pro all the people. I am pro-Palestinian liberation. I am pro-Israel having a homeland. I don't know why we can't do both!

I am pro-freedom. I am pro-justice. I am pro-love. We are pro-love. And we cannot let institutions and systems fake us into believing that we can't have it all. Everybody can have a land. Everybody can have a home. Everybody can live lives of non-violence. Every child should be able to live and survive.

That's the side I'm on—the side of love. How about you? Family, we're gonna keep giving you resources, we're gonna keep putting talks in the world for you to hear different perspectives, news articles, stories that will help increase your imagination about whose people we are and the work that we must do.

I am not going to be quiet, even if I get canceled. And I'm going to keep calling you into the love movement.

Are you coming? Are YOU coming? Are you COMING? Let's go!
Amen.