

Sermon for October 26th 2015
How, then, shall we live?¹
Matt. 22:34-40, Leviticus 19:18

This morning, as with church leaders across the country, I feel it's necessary to address the events that unfolded in Ottawa this week. Already there has been a lot of commentary and reaction. I for one (and I know I'm not alone) am concerned about what the political fallout will be if it is based on reaction rather than careful consideration of long-term consequences. One of the most thoughtful responses that I heard and deeply appreciated was Willard Metzger's, executive director of MC Canada. His response was mostly a lament. Within that prayer of lament he named a lot of truth. His prayer spoke of sadness for the persons whose lives were lost, he mourns the rhetoric of revenge as the best way to establish calm and confidence. He mourns that religion has become so tainted that the loving creator can be grossly misrepresented by acts of violence. He mourns that our global family is divided by systems of defense and self-interest rather than a common commitment of seeking the good for all people and he prays for mercy, healing and peace.

And we have prayed similarly this morning. Dylan led us in such a prayer. As the country reacts to admittedly senseless killings it also brought to my mind many other acts of senseless violence and murder that go largely unremarked and certainly not mourned by our entire nation, namely missing and murdered aboriginal women, and the continued carnage of war and extremist violence currently being carried

¹ © Marilyn Zehr, 2014.

out in Iraq and Syria and beyond. For just one moment this country knew the fear that is a daily reality for the people who wonder what kind of death and destruction will result from Canadian fighter jets. These people do not go to their homes at night as we do feeling safe and secure, or knowing if they will have water and/or electricity or enough food for the day or the morrow – because all of these things are casualties of war.

So, I found myself asking, in light of all of this, because none of us are not implicated or affected somehow, in light of all this horror, the question entered my mind, “How, then, shall we live? “

This question can be found in Ezekiel

33: 10 Now you, mortal, [God is saying to Ezekiel] say to the house of Israel, Thus you [Israel] have said: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?”

In common usage this has often changed to - How, then, *shall* we live?

From time to time this questions arises, either because we have come to a point of realization that ‘somethin’s gotta give,’ or something, or many things need to change – as we witness our neighbours on this planet suffer from the violence of war, oppression and climate disasters.

How, then, shall we live?

It's a famous question, by the way. First articulated in Ezekiel and more recently, as in the 1970's recently, by Francis Schaeffer in his famous book and 10-part film documentary series that traces the philosophical tradition from Ancient Rome to the present in an attempt to explain our increasingly secular society. His book and documentaries became very popular in evangelical Christian circles. He named his book and film series with the King James Version of the question, "how should we then live?" Schaeffer's work is credited with activating and fueling the political movements that became known as the Christian right in the USA and its counter-part in Canada. The most common response to his question was to reclaim or re-articulate the Christian foundation of the United States. Now this gives us pause when we as Mennonites question the appropriateness of the tightness of this link between church and state, although the appropriateness of recognizing the political nature of the gospel should not go unnoted.

This raises much larger questions that I am unable to address entirely this morning, but now I want to draw my sermon back to our texts for today and their relationship to this question, how, then, shall we live?

The question, "How, then, shall we live?" may have been made famous recently by Francis Schaeffer, however, when reading and

interpreting scripture, we quickly realize that this question has existed for as long as humanity has.

In fact our text from Matthew and our text from Leviticus are both directly responding to that question and they are doing so, not as it seems with direct injunctions, (although that's certainly part of it) but as representations, if you look at the whole, of the debate about how to answer the question. Matthew and Leviticus are debates about how we should live. And like contemporary debates they include very strong assertions.

In order to simplify what might otherwise be a complex presentation, I've created a flowchart with the primary question of this sermon at the top **(Slide 1)**

How, then, shall we live?

First, let's look at the question itself. The question itself can be asked in two ways.

One way is, "What should we do to live well/righteously?" or another way, which seems more true to the question as it is posed in Ezekiel, "How can we live in order not to die? It's more of a survival question. The second way of asking the question reveals that the stakes are much higher.

And as I said our scriptures reveal the debates that unfold on the way to answering this question. **(Slide 2)**

The question, "What shall we do to live well/righteously," seems to be what is happening in Matthew as a whole, but really gets focused

here in chapter 22 and 23. The debate revealed in the book of Matthew is a thoroughly internal Jewish debate between Jesus' followers and the temple-centered legal and ritual concerns of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In chapter 22, when the Pharisees and Sadducees begin to realize that in Jesus' parables of the Kingdom that they are implicated and not usually for the good, they send their disciples along with the Herodians to entrap Jesus in his words and actions. First, they ask him a question about paying taxes and Jesus responds with "give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The Sadducees are up next in the debate and they want to know about marital status in the resurrection if a woman has been successively married to several brothers who predeceased her. Jesus responds that they do not know the power of God that in the resurrection there will not be anyone marrying or given in marriage and that God is the God of the living not the dead – so finally the Pharisees come back to him with a lawyer this time and ask 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 neighbour as yourself.' On these two hang all the law and the prophets. Debate clinched it would seem.

After this response, the tables turn and Jesus asks the Pharisees a question they cannot answer. When they cannot answer this question they don't ask him any more questions and Jesus launches into his famous and harsh "woe to the scribes and Pharisees"

speech. This debate in Matthew takes place in the context of an internal struggle for proper understanding of the Jewish faith of their ancestors and how those struggles should be resolved in a new context, “How, then, shall we live?” This new context – the temple has been destroyed and they are asking, “what shall we do now? How will we live?” Brother against brother, teacher against teacher, Jesus the Rabbi, speaks as a Rabbi to his fellow Rabbi’s and at the core of the debate is his response: Love God and Love your neighbour – upon these hang all the law and the prophets.

(Slide 3) Leviticus is similar to Matthew in that it appears to contain a debate between reform-minded priests that scholars think may have been contemporary with Isaiah, scholars refer to them with the letter H to designate that they are from the Holiness tradition that has been placed alongside an earlier priestly tradition. Leviticus 17-26 then is known as the Holiness code. Although there are long lists of ethical injunctions in these passages that address a broad range of ethical situations from personal and private to corporate, the entire code can be summed up by the injunction to be Holy, for I your God, the eternal one, is Holy. I have chosen only one verse to be read because it is considered not only to be the centre of Leviticus, but to be the central verse of the whole Torah, coming as it does roughly in the middle of Genesis 1 and Deuteronomy 34. **19:18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. And then

throughout chapter 19 one reads repeatedly, “you shall be Holy for I the Lord your God am Holy.”

There have been centuries of debate about what it could possibly mean to be Holy as God is Holy. For one thing, holiness fosters a sense of separateness. **(Slide 4)** God called out the people of Israel to be a blessing to all nations. Traditionally we Mennonites have heard a similar call to be separate in our imitation of Christ, to become Christ-like or to put on the mind of Christ, and even to take up our crosses and follow Jesus. This call to be Holy as God is Holy or to become more like Christ the incarnation of God among us as I’ve said, fosters separateness or it certainly has traditionally. At points along the Mennonite historical trajectory this separateness or distinctiveness has been seen as a very good thing especially when it manifests itself as a call to be clear that our allegiance is to Jesus Christ rather than to any particular nation state in this world. Every time I read a newspaper this week I witnessed the ramped up patriotic response to the events in Ottawa and as I did so, I felt more and more separate from this nation that I call home. And I squirmed when a couple of my family members changed their profile pictures on facebook to Canadian Flags. This kind of patriotism has no place in a life that is first aligned with Christ and his way of peace, particularly now that the flag represents a country that is becoming increasingly militarized and whose leaders have recently decided to take us into another war or to extend our war years to beyond the last thirteen.

(Slide 5)- Finally, the core of the Matthean debate and the core of the debate in Leviticus is the same in the end – to be Holy as God is Holy and to be called out to follow Christ and his way of Peace, these two things are not so very different. These things can be summed up as the injunction to Love God and Love our neighbour. This in the end is not separateness; a separateness of vision and allegiance, yes; we are aligned elsewhere other than a nation state and its flag, but to align oneself primarily with love of God above all else with mind and heart and strength – the end result of this is that it takes us directly back into the beloved world of our creator. This separateness of holiness leads us into the clearest requirement for connectedness that there is. Love of God cannot be separated from Love of Neighbour. The command to Love God that takes us right into the heart of God with our whole being; that love takes us back into the world with the heart and the eyes of Christ. On this depends all the law and the prophets. All ethical injunctions must return to this core and based on this we shall live. And who is our neighbour? We've asked this several times in the course of our fall series. Willard Metzger in his prayer summarized for us that in the light of the tragedies this week on Parliament hill, every single person who has died - the men on Parliament hill but also those in more intense conflict zones – these are our neighbours. The people who are called upon to react to these events on “behalf”

of the rest of us, our political leaders, Stephen Harper and others; these are our neighbours. And I think it is important for us to note that our neighbours are still our neighbours even when and especially when we don't agree with them and even the ones with whom we would strongly debate the way forward and the answer to the question, "How, then shall we live?"

And so this morning I conclude my sermon as Willard concludes his prayer.

My prayer, Willard's prayer, the prayer of a church of the peace of Jesus Christ:

May the light of God's love blind hatred and revenge and give us all a vision for the dawn of a new day filled with the power of a love for all our neighbours.

How, then, shall we live?

Love God and Love our neighbours. Amen