

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost- October 8, 2023

Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34

WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

“I want to believe- and so do you- in a complete set of propositions about right and wrong. I want to believe in findable rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe- and so do you- in no such thing. I want to believe rather that we are wholly free to choose for ourselves what we ought to do and who we ought to become. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free. We want at the same time to discover the right and the good AND to create them for ourselves.”

Those were the words of Yale law professor Arthur Leff in a 1979 lecture that has become widely known and frequently cited in the world of legal scholarship. Rightly so, I think, for in it he portrayed with great power and clarity one of the main legal, ethical, and spiritual dilemmas of our time. “We want at the same time to discover the right and the good AND to create them for ourselves.”

Arthur Leff believed that at the heart of this dilemma lies a fundamental fact: any definitive moral judgment implies the existence of an authoritative judge. In Leff’s words, any such judgment implies the existence of “someone out there” who stands behind it as its source of authority. But is there, in fact, “someone out there”? And if so, who is it?

God used to be widely accepted as that Someone, but not so much anymore. In the dominant intellectual cultures of our day God is usually far out of the picture. In God’s place, we, as individual human beings, have been elevated to the status of what Leff called “godlets”- little gods. Given the assumption that there is no “big God”, no god with a capital G, each of us godlets is felt to have as much authority to set moral standards as any others of us.

Leff gave the example of a group of contemporary godlets who decide to assert the moral standard, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” He said that in the spiritual climate that prevails today such an assertion invites “the formal intellectual equivalent of what is known in barrooms and schoolyards as “the grand sez who?” People who want to commit adultery, or who sympathize with that desire, can always ask, “What gives you the authority to prescribe what’s good for me?” The expected answer is “No one.” No one- as long as we assume that the only source of moral authority is us godlets and that no one of us little gods has any more of that authority than anyone else.

Arthur Leff wanted us to acknowledge the blunt truth of what the great Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, once expressed so succinctly- “If God is dead, everything is permitted.” In most of his lecture, Leff reviewed the ways in which our present age has sought to avoid that conclusion. He pointed out that we’ve tried to establish moral authority by declaring the sanctity of the “social contract”, or by invoking the sovereign will of democratic peoples, or by celebrating the playful irony of postmodern culture. But every alternative based on strictly human authority eventually crumbles. Leff saw clearly how each of them ultimately fails the test of “the grand sez who”.

These days that failure may not upset many of us so long as the focus remains on an act like adultery. To many people in the early 21st century, adultery seems relatively tame and private in the scope of its consequences. But Leff understood that the power of “the grand sez who” can be wielded against any standard that’s proposed along the whole spectrum of human conduct. It can be used not only by those who wish to commit adultery but also, for example, by those who want to commit genocide.

We, with our little band of godlets, might want to insist, “Thou shalt not commit genocide.” But then the other little gods like Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, and General Custer can say in return, “What gives you the authority to prescribe what’s good for us?” Without belief in an ultimate moral authority beyond us, the only honest answer we can give is “No one.” We’re left then with only “Might makes right.” We’re left with a world soaked in blood as competing godlets fight it out.

As Arthur Leff put it, if we want moral judgments that are beyond question, we have to find a judge who is beyond question. We must find “the unjudged judge, the unrulled legislator, the premise maker who rests on no premises, the uncreated creator of value”. Leff continued, “We are never going to get anywhere in legal or ethical theory unless we finally face the fact that in the words of the Psalmist, there is no one like unto the Lord.”

Arthur Leff wanted desperately to make moral judgments that are beyond question, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe that there is an unjudged judge. He didn’t say why. At no point in his lecture did he offer any reasons for assuming that “God is dead”. Maybe it was an assumption he felt that no one in his audience would seriously question. In any case, he ended his lecture with these pointed and poignant words:

“All I can say is this: it looks as if we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves, and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect; looking around the world, it appears that if all of us are brothers, the ruling model is Cain and Abel. Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror, seems to have worked to make us ‘good’ . . . As things stand now, everything is up for grabs.

“Nevertheless: (Gassing) babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved. Those who stood up and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, and Pol Pot- and General Custer, too- have earned salvation. Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned. There is in the world such a thing as evil. (All together now) Sez who? God help us.”

Today’s Scripture reading from the book of Jeremiah comes from a time that in many ways was similar to our own. The people of Israel had lost their way. They had repeatedly forgotten and broken the covenant that God had made with them. In time, they were conquered and their cities were laid waste. They were plucked up and sent off into exile in Babylon. According to Jeremiah, it was because they had forgotten God’s covenant.

And yet, in the midst of their exile, Jeremiah announced to them that a new day would come. Life in their homeland would be restored, their cities would be rebuilt, and their farms would be replanted. In that day, God would make a new covenant with them.

In the old covenant, Israel had been set free from slavery in Egypt, but for what purpose? Was it so they could decide for themselves what they ought to do and who they ought to become? Was it so they could create for themselves their own meanings of right and wrong, good and evil?

By no means. Israel was set free to be a light to the nations. They were liberated to be a witness to the world that God is the ruler of all and to proclaim that there is “no one like unto the Lord.” How were they supposed to make that witness?

We remember that story, too. Moses was called up onto the mountain. There, he was given the Ten Commandments. They were the means by which Israel would bear witness to God’s covenant, the beacon through which Israel would bring light to the nations. I will be your God. You will be my people. You will have no other gods before me. You will not kill, steal, lie, covet or commit adultery.

The covenant showed Israel how to live. They didn’t have to make up their own moral standards because the way to life rightly lived was given to them by God, the ruler of all. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone. Moses had to bring them off the mountain, down to the people in the valley. There, he needed to teach them God’s way.

But Jeremiah said that the Day is coming when God will make a new covenant- not new in the sense of new rules of right and wrong, but new in that the covenant will be “as a law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts . . . No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

The Day will come, says Jeremiah, when God’s covenant will make us new at the very depths of our souls. It will be no alien, external law imposed from without, but instead it will be the law of our truest and deepest being. “I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Arthur Leff was groping toward that great Day. He saw traces of God’s covenant on his heart, but he couldn’t make out in Whose hand they were written. That’s why even though he couldn’t affirm God, he still insisted that, “(G)assing babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved . . . There is in the world such a thing as evil.”

He knew painfully that upon hearing such statements anyone can always ask, “Sez who?” In return, all he could say was, “I and the other little gods who are like me say so.” But we are able to say much more. We can reply, “God says so.”

This comes to us purely as a gift. We can never take any credit for it because we’ve only received it from God’s generous hand. By God’s grace, we have come to know that there ARE definitive moral judgments which bind our hearts from far beyond us. We never claim that we grasp or understand them perfectly, and even less do we ever suggest that we always live by them faithfully.

Yet we do know that these judgments are not simply a matter of our personal preference or opinion or feeling. They are not the arbitrary result of a merely cultural conditioning. Instead, they are among the divine means of grace by which we can live with a truthful aim amid the chaos of countless and competing godlets. They’re the imprint of the Torah upon us, the way of the living God.

We, as Christians, like Israel before us, bear witness to God who IS the unjudged judge and the uncreated creator of value. It is God who stands far above and beyond us and, in doing so, stands truly with us and for us. We are not left alone to our own devices. Through God’s goodness, we’ve been given the way of the Lord, written on our hearts. It is among the greatest of our blessings.

This emphatically does NOT mean that only we who are Christians or Jews can know and do what is right and good. A crucial part of what it does mean, though, is wonderfully illustrated, I

think, by a story from an unnamed African-American minister who recalled his experience in the early days of the civil rights movement in Mississippi.

He remembered busloads of undeniably good, selfless, and generous, but self-consciously *nonreligious* people who came down from the north to help in the struggle for freedom. They came to lay themselves on the line, to join hands with their Black brothers and sisters, to march, and to risk imprisonment and even death, if necessary. They were exceptionally fine people.

But the first thing that Martin Luther King, Jr. and his people did was to bring them along with everyone else into a small, crowded, and hot black Baptist church. There they were led into singing, praying, and singing some more *to God*. These good, nonreligious folks thought to themselves, "Well, that's fine and good if you like this sort of thing. But, really, what in the world does all of this interminable preaching and praying, singing, and shouting have to do with the real business of fighting for the rights of black people? Some of them wondered out loud, "Why are we here in this church when we should be out there in the streets?"

The answer came from the Rev. Dr. King. He said, "You must understand- we black folk have been working at this fight against injustice a lot longer than most of you. We know that two hundred years of evil won't be wiped out in one march to Jackson, Mississippi. This preaching and these prayers and these songs have kept us going for two hundred years, and they'll be the only thing that keeps us going because they put us *in touch with God*. Without the power and vision of God, we won't last long in the battle. "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand . . ."

In the coming days and years, we will feel anger and compassion rise within us when we see injustice. We will hear a still, strong voice urging us to tell the truth even when we're sure that we can get away with a lie. We will know the urge to sacrifice significantly of ourselves for the sake of other people, even when most everyone else says that only fools do such things.

When all of these movements stir within us, we'll know that it's the New Covenant being written on our hearts. We will rejoice and be glad because it's one of God's best and most powerful gifts to us. We will give thanks because by God's amazing grace it makes us strong for the battle. Amen.