

Romemu Shabbat April 14, 2017 Sermon

So where were we last week and the week before? We were, we were talking in the last couple of weeks about putting principles before people and how that's a danger. Those who remember, Moshe was standing outside of the Mishkan, the tabernacle, and we learned from the Torah that God was willing to whisper to Moshe to understand what Moshe's feelings were because he put people before principles, put love before law. And then last week we talked about getting messy with the ashes of the altar, right? We have to get messy, that spirituality is messy. That until something is acknowledged as broken, we don't even think to fix it. That things don't change till they become what they are. Remember we talked about that last week? Like a pretty basic spiritual principle.

Some people call it the Zen principle of paradoxical change. That's a... But something doesn't change till it becomes what it is means that as long as you're not acknowledging what's true, there's no hope that it'll change into something different, right? We break the matzah every single Passover night to say we don't begin the Seder until we acknowledge that slavery is something broken. We break a matzah because it's broken.

Humpty-dumpty sat on a wall. But we're all the king's horses and king's men, right? That's us. And so here we are, where are we tonight? What's happening tonight for us, where are we? So first and foremost, of course, as a community that shares a space with West End Presbyterian Church, we are very much aware that today is Good Friday, Holy Friday, Passion Friday. It is the commemoration of the crucifixion of Jesus. The death of love, as it were. But it's ultimate resurrection as love. And as transcendent love. So here we are on Good Friday, on Cholamoi Pesach, the Shabbos of Pesach, and of course, Tax Day.

Taxes. So you have everything you need. You have death, you have taxes, right? Let's talk about sex, okay. Let's talk about love. Because something amazing happens tomorrow morning that you might gloss over. If you weren't in shul tomorrow morning, you didn't know. We kind of alluded to it in the beginning of the service tonight. Every Passover, on the Shabbat of Cholamoid, on the Shabbat that is the intermediate Shabbat of the Passover holiday, we read the Song of Songs. The Rabbis instituted that we would read a book that was at one point in our history potentially X-rated. People didn't want it in the canon. It was decidedly not biblical. Speaking of love and eros and lovers. In the church, they allegorized it to Jesus and the church.

And in our own tradition, we allegorized it as well. Song of Songs, which is between two lovers, is between Israel and God. Something dangerous, maybe, about love. But the Rabbis said, let's put it into Passover. Passover is a love holiday. And we get it, right? We get why Passover is a love holiday.

Some people even have the custom of saying the entire Song of Songs not just tomorrow morning, but already after the first Seder. As if it wasn't long enough, they'll stay and they'll say the whole eight chapters of the Song of Songs. Pretty amazing, right? Shir ha'shirim ha'shir l'shlamo y'shateinim l'shukot pil. Right? UB40 came along and made that into a famous song. Red, red wine. Oh, it's so beautiful. The Song of Songs is so juicy. It's so

yummy. It's so loving. It's all about love. And Passover, of course, is a holiday that, associated with Abraham, Avraham, or Havid, becomes a... Passover is all about rebirth. Love is in the air.

But something interesting about love happens on the second day of Passover, which really teaches us something very interesting about a deep spiritual principle that I think the Torah wants us to learn and apply in our lives. The Torah wants to teach us something about what it is to be not just an evolved human being, but an evolving spiritual being. The Torah wants to give us good advice, because the Torah always wants to give us good advice. Some people hear that as command. And there's something to be said for feeling obligated, but there's something even more profound about hearing good advice and then being told, well, see if it works.

So try this one on. The Torah says, no sooner are you free from Egypt, no sooner have you walked through the waters that might have killed you, no sooner have you arrived at your Seder, taken your seat, finished your first day, you have one day of full freedom. You're thinking, wow, what do you mean? We have seven days? No. Freedom, in its fullest sense, is only one day, because on the second day, starting from the second night, the Torah already had us working. Already committing to a long-term project that most of us, when we think of freedom, think that is the opposite of freedom. When I think of freedom, I don't think of long-term, two-month-long projects that I sign up for. I don't think of daily blogs and emails. I think free, at last.

But the Torah says, on the second day of Passover, we are to begin a count that will take us 49 days, from the second day of Passover, all the way up to the holiday of weeks, Pentecost. Seven weeks. Tispor means to count. Mispar in Hebrew is counting. We start a 49-day vigil on the very second day of our liberation. We start our holiday, we arrive at our Seder, we get our seats, we get ready to tell the story, the Sipur Yitzchak Betrayim, and we're all ready, right? And all of a sudden, we have another religious obligation mingled in. Not only are we to experience freedom and liberation, to feel as if we ourselves left Egypt, but here's another one for you.

Now start to count. Make sure that you count every day. Make sure that you count Sheva, Shevu, Ot, Timimot. They have to be pure, whole, complete, seven-week periods. Each day has to be counted uniquely. If you skip one day, it's as if you didn't do the full 49. It's 49 days as one block. Can I take two weeks? No, you take seven. Can I take four? I'll take four plus a draft pick. No, it's seven. Seven weeks.

The Torah tells us something profound about love. Because if Passover is a holiday of love, and if love frees us and liberates us, it also is a habit. Love is a habit of the heart. A habit of the heart. When Aristotle wrote his works on ethics, he spoke about virtues. And he claimed that excellence and virtues are habits. Things that we do over and over again, that we become better and better at. A discipline. Something that we practice. Like a piano, or an instrument, or giving a sermon, or being a congregant. A daily practice, a regimen like yoga, or like any other discipline that requires us to show up daily.

Is there a parade happening outside? There is. It's that parade every year. I know. Okay. I should have thought into the sermon. Okay. So like a parade, that goes slowly at a kind of

pace that has you drawn in, and yet thinking, wow, that's a distraction. Maybe not. One step at a time, one foot in front of the other, following the pace car. The 49 steps of the parade, the 49 steps of the journey of what is called the counting of the Omer, the counting of the Omer. Those are the flashing lights of the police car. This is a good moment for me to tell you a story.

Romemu used to be in the gymnasium next door to this church, and we were praying in the second floor gym with windows that go from the floor to the ceiling, and I think it was this parade, one Friday night, and I think I was speaking exactly in the same way, and what we did was we got up from our seats and we walked to the windows, and we faced the windows to see the parade, and it was so magnificent to see them praying, you know, so beautiful. It was such a sense of, you know, if we could make the window go away, we would be together with them, you know. It's very powerful.

So let's listen for a second, and I'll try to finish my conversation in between, okay? There was a great Rebbe, a Hasidic Rebbe, named Edegel Machanei Ephraim, he was the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, and he said that the word to count in Hebrew, mispar, is connected to the word sapphire, sapir. He said that when we say on Passover evening, the more one tells the story, it's as if one is saying, the more one sapphires, the more one shines the jewel of the story, you tell a story over and over again, it gets better and better and better. And he says the same thing about the counting of the Omer, which is called Spirata Omer, the counting of the Omer, he says, each and every day is as if you are polishing the love jewel, polishing the heart, which is, of course, the great source of love that needs continual, perpetual, perennial opening and shining and sapphire and sapphire and sapphire. Each day is a way to train the heart to love and to be in the habit of loving.

M. Scott Peck, who wrote a classic called *The Road Less Traveled*. In the beginning of this book, *The Road Less Traveled*, he has a definition of love that I've memorized and I've had with me for 20 something years. He writes there that love is the will to extend oneself for the spiritual benefit and growth of another human being. Love is the will to extend oneself for the spiritual growth of another human being. The spiritual growth of another human being, it's not easy to extend ourselves. We need to practice extension. We need to connect ourselves to that place called love. It isn't easy. It is daily. It requires patience. It requires an elevating of habits. Aliyah la regal. A lifting up of what is habitual to a place of a habit of the heart. I was watching a documentary a couple of weeks ago.

It was my second time. I mentioned it in a sermon maybe a year ago called *Cowspiracy*. How many people went out to see *Cowspiracy*? How many people have heard of *Cowspiracy*? *Cowspiracy* is a movie made by a documentarian who wanted to understand one basic fact. Listen to these facts. Why is it that the majority of the environmental organizations, the non-for-profit environmental organizations in America do not mention that the number one contributing factor to global warming and climate issues is animal agriculture? 51% of all methane and carbon dioxide that is sent out into the environment is from cattle. It's the number one deforesting cause. For every pound of beef it costs us 665 gallons of water to produce. You could stop taking a shower for half a year and you will save more water by stopping eating hamburgers once a month or other beef products.

But what is it that stops us from making those small changes? It isn't because we're bad people. It isn't even because we're lazy. It's because we have bad habits. And we're not willing to extend ourselves on some level for the sake and the benefit of the spiritual growth of another.

The whole Torah is trying to cut us from those who take to those who give. From those who have a habit of receiving to those who have a habit of giving. The whole Torah is trying to ingrain in us the capacity to love. So on this Shabbat of love this Passion Friday on this Passover Shabbat with Song of Songs we are already beginning the journey of one day at a time. And so I ask each and every one of you if you don't have a daily habit of loving what will that look like? If you don't have a daily habit of what it is to extend yourself for the sake of the growth of another human being what will engender that habit for you? Without our habits of the heart we can't build a better world. But we can if we begin one day at a time.

So here's my charge to all of you. Go try it and see how it works. Let me know. Let me know if you can develop a habit of the heart that invites you to extend yourself for the sake of the spiritual growth of another. Let's see how it works.

Let's rise.