

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thess 2:1-8; Matt 22:34-46 The Rev. Linda Spiers  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – Oct 29, 2017 Trinity Episcopal Church

Jesus summarized the law with these the two great commandments: love God and love you neighbor. Jesus would have known and absorbed the words from Leviticus which s gives us a little path into how one might do that: no hate in our hearts for anyone, no grudges against any of our people, no unjust judgment against anyone, no profit by the blood of your neighbor—you shall be holy. I was immersed in these commandments to love God and to love neighbor Friday night and yesterday as I attended the *Spirit 1 Conference: How Christians & Muslims Flourish Together in These Times*.

Mahan Mirza, a Muslim and Professor of the Practice in the Contending Modernities Program at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame, was Friday's keynote speaker for about 150 people of all sorts and conditions. He reminded us of the top 10 stories in the media for the year 2016—most of them being tragic or close to tragic. Then he shared some stories from his own live that turned the tables into thinking about how we can experience the love of God and love of neighbor with more light than those top 10 media stories.

Mahan and his family were moving to California and they were towing all of their belongings in their vehicle with a hitched trailer following behind. They were making good progress when all of a sudden the hitch had a malfunction. The trailer didn't break loose at first. It just began to swing mightily. When Mahan attempted

to slow down, the trailer then would bump them in the back. It was a frightful experience for him and his family. “What do I do?” he frantically thought. “What do I do?” The trailer broke loose and went wildly in a 360-degree motion and landed on the median without hitting anyone! Mahan pulled his vehicle over to the side of the road with heart pounding. Now what? How to get the trailer in the midst of a busy highway. He and his family had now gotten out of their vehicle on the roadside and were still in a frantic state of what to do.

A big flat bed truck pulled up behind them. The truck driver got out of his truck and approached them—a big guy with a beard and a very large cross hanging around his neck. He spoke gruffly and told them to get back in the car. They were still frightened. The big burly guy had called police for them who ultimately stopped traffic on the highway so that the trailer could be loaded onto the flatbed. The big burly Christian guy took the family to his home and worked on the trailer for hours until it was ready and repaired for travel—the hitch was now functional. The big burly Christian guy’s wife gave the family water and the children sweets and cared for them while the repairs were going on. Mahan and his family continued on their journey and arrived safely in California.

Mahan had made assumptions about this big burly Christian guy just by his looks and the initial sound of his voice. He became a friend and a neighbor who offered help in the midst of Mahan’s family crisis. Mahan went on to share other stories about himself and how loving neighbor, no matter who neighbor is, has

formed him and deepened his relationship with God. The stories he told are the stories that most of us have inside of us—stories that Christians and Muslims have that build bridges vs. scare people.

One woman during the question and answer time stood up and shared how uneasy she was about coming to this event. She was scared and had not been in the presence of Muslims. She thanked Mahan for his talk that comforted her fears. She was glad she had come. I was amazed at her courage for coming and for sharing her fears. Bridges were built Friday and Saturday!

Earlier in the week I attended the Board meeting for the Society of the Increase in the Ministry—a board I have served on for a number of years. The Society was started in 1857 to raise monies and provide scholarship assistance to Episcopal seminarians. We met in NYC because Courtney Cowart, the new executive director for the Society, is now located in NYC vs. Hartford. We had dinner Wednesday night at a wonderful little restaurant on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue at 20<sup>th</sup> Street—Le Zie Trattoria. The owner's name is Claudio, and our new executive director has known Claudio for years when she worked at General Seminary and later at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street. Courtney was at Trinity Wall Street when 911 happened and was responsible for coordinating food for the volunteers and emergency responders.

After a few days the Health Department stopped any cooking outside at Ground Zero, so Courtney had to find a way to feed people by bringing food in.

She went to Claudio and talked about the dilemma. Claudio immediately said he would provide food. For six months, Claudio's staff provided 150 vegetarian meals and 150 meat meals to Ground Zero daily and a caterer friend delivered them. The little group of people that met just days after 9/11 sat at the same table planning how to feed people—the same table where we ate on Wednesday. I had a chance to meet Claudio and thank him for his generosity. He gave those 300 meals daily somehow as a response of loving God and loving neighbor. The food at Le Zie was outstanding and I highly recommend it when you're in NYC!

I am imagining that you have each encountered an example of loving God and loving neighbor in your lives this week or will during this coming week. Jesus summarized all the laws with the two commandments to love God and love neighbor. The lawyer from the Pharisees was trying to test Jesus. Jesus quotes scripture that was a part of him—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Scott Stoner in his weekly message from the Living Compass reminded readers "whatever we pay attention to is what will grow." The Gospel of good news we have this week to love God and love neighbor calls out to us to pay attention. Jesus calls us to pay attention to how this loving happens in surprising ways and in ordinary ways. Loving builds bridges between peoples, one brick at a time. Look for the bricks and pay attention as you go about your week.