

What Does God Expect of a Nation? Deuteronomy 10:12-21 Matthew 22:34-40

I wish we did not have to hold an annual Remembrance Day service. I wish we as a nation did not have to remember men and women who had to fight and who died in the world wars and other conflicts, let alone in the ongoing wars of 2007. Because I wish we didn't have stories such as the one by Richard Johnson in the November 10 *National Post* titled "The Other Faces of War." Cpl. Darryl Carswell promised his father and stepmother he would come home. But Cpl. Carswell, 25 years old, was killed in Afghanistan in June of this year. The emotions of tiredness, terrible sorrow and grief were evident on the faces of his parents. We *must* remember them. We must remember them with sorrow and with thanks because of their sacrifice for our freedoms and for the freedoms of people in other nations around the world.

I also wish we as nation could have a spirited, rational public conversation about God's love and compassion for *all* the nations of the world and what that could look like. I wish there could be a section in every newspaper in the country where the learned and the not-so-learned would talk together about what God's love might look like, not only in their private lives but also "out there" – in their local communities, in their cities, in their provinces, in their country and in the world.

Now I am not talking about what is normally called "religion" -- because then we would probably engage in conflict of some sort. But connecting with God's love is so very different. At some fundamental level, I believe we all know there is a difference between religion and God's love. Moses came to know it. He knew what it meant to kill someone. When his murder was exposed, he was forced to run for his life and he spent 40-plus years in the countryside thinking about the difference. Jesus clearly knew the difference between religion and God's love too. And living his life based on God's love and not on religion cost him his life – although that is not the end of Jesus' story! Perhaps what we do here and in other places of worship, whether on Sunday or any day of the week, *is* a kind of public conversation about God's love.

If I were to be involved in such a public conversation about God's love outside the church walls, I might begin by referring to the two Scriptures we read this morning. Then I would say, "Let us reason together about the love of God for us, our love for God, and God's love and, therefore, our love for others."

Moses said something like this to the Israelite people after talking about God's involvement in their lives and about the renewal of God's covenant of goodness and love with them. Moses asked the question: "**What do you think God expects from you?**" You will find this in the reading from Deuteronomy. It was (and is) a reasonable question. Now the answer is not hidden. There is no special secret to discover. The answer is provided in this passage. It includes God's five expectations -- for the Israelites and, may I say, for us as Christians too.

The first expectation: "**Live in God's presence in holy reverence.**" Some translations say "*Fear* the Lord your God." Now fear here means neither abject terror nor simple respect. It is an attribute of deep humility -- of honour before God. It involves the recognition **that**

God is our Creator and we are totally dependent on Him for our very life. That kind of recognition will call forth awe and reverence.

And if that is the case, the second expectation Moses mentions follows naturally. If we truly revere God then we will **“follow the road God sets out for [us].”** Following God’s road or God’s ways is a metaphor for God’s will for our lives. That will is largely expressed in God’s law and commandments. And God assured the Israelites that if they chose to follow His ways, they would be choosing *life!*

The third expectation God had for the Israelites, Moses said, was that they would **“love God.”** If they revered God and followed His ways, they would discover God’s goodness and so would gladly obey God’s command: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5) – in other words, with your whole being. Loving God connects unsurprisingly with revering God and following God.

I understand that, in the dominant language of the country of Ghana, the only way to ask the question "What is your religion?" is to ask the following question instead: **"Whom do you serve?"** That intrigues me. **"Whom do you serve?" Whom do I serve?** Regardless of denominational loyalties and official creeds, our true god is really the one we serve. So Moses states God’s fourth expectation: **“Serve God, your God, with everything you have in you”** or, as another version states, **“Serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”** And the fifth expectation again seems to follow naturally: **“Obey the commandments and regulations of God.”**

These five expectations, when met, comprise the meaning of a good life for human beings. God’s commandments are meant not for evil but for our good, not for death or boredom or to control us but for LIFE!

Now I can imagine someone asking, “Why would a nation, let alone individuals, give any consideration to such expectations as these?” In our public conversation, I would reply as Moses replied -- **because of the character of God, because of who God is.** And the God Moses served thousands of years ago is the God I serve today -- the God of Scripture who is good and just and compassionate and forgiving – and so much more.

Listen again to Deuteronomy 10:14: “Look around you: Everything you see is GOD’s -- the heavens above and beyond, the Earth, and everything on it.” We hear this over and over again throughout the Scriptures: **God is the Creator of all that is. This is important for us to ponder.**

I have just started reading the latest book by Antony Flew titled *There Is a God*. Flew is one of the leading analytical philosophers of the 20th century. He earned much of his fame by arguing that one should presuppose atheism until evidence of God surfaces. He now believes such evidence exists. I suppose that is why the book’s subtitle is *“How the world’s most notorious atheist changed his mind.”* In the book he outlines the scientific discoveries and philosophical arguments that turned him from a staunch atheist into a believer that there is a God who **created the universe.** And that’s why I am telling you about Antony Flew. With refreshing openness to argument and an absence of anger and hostility, Flew shows his commitment to following the argument wherever it leads. And

the evidence resulted in, to his own astonishment, his conversion to belief in a **Creator God**. Part of God's nature and character is being **the Creator** of all good that exists.

Immediately following this statement in our Scripture of God being the Creator is another significant reason in God's character why a nation and individuals would give consideration to God's involvement in their lives. Listen: **"But it was your ancestors who GOD fell in love with;** he picked their children -- that's *you!* -- out of all the other peoples." And they were the fewest and most insignificant of peoples! Yet **they mattered to God then. And we matter to God now!**

We talk about the Israelites being God's "chosen" people and that may sound to us like favouritism of a sort. Perhaps it is in a way but not for the reasons we might think. Remember God's call on Abraham in Genesis 12: **"I will bless you -- to be a blessing to the whole world."** You see, God chose Israel out of His love for them to be the **carriers** of His love, not only for their own nation but also for the nations of the world – even Israel's enemies! (Remember the story of Jonah?) God wants us to understand that He *"doesn't* play favourites" when it comes to those whom He loves. Being chosen, if you want to say it that way, carries great responsibilities and compassion as we shall see.

As followers of the Good Shepherd, we believe that the Messiah came out of Israel. Jesus came as the Redeemer not only for Israel but also for the whole world. We catch a glimpse of God being for the whole world – all the nations – in the declaration here in Deuteronomy: **"God, your God, is the God of all gods, he's the Master of all masters, a God immense and powerful and awesome."** God is revealed again and again throughout the Scripture not only as the powerful Lord of all nature and the whole universe but also as the Lord who redeems in history through Jesus because of His great love for *all* peoples.

In our public conversation, there might arise another question to frame our consideration of God's expectations. The question is **"What might prevent or stop us from responding to God's expectations?"** There are several possibilities I could bring into the conversation. For instance, Do we have sufficient information – we don't have enough knowledge to respond appropriately? What God are we talking about – there seem to be so many vying for attention? But I'll leave these for another message. In Deuteronomy, Moses gives us reasons why the Israelites didn't respond to God. In plain language, because of their callous, unbelieving hearts and wilful hard-headedness.

You see, religion alone, even with its good practices, is dead unless it comes from the heart. In the New Testament Scripture from Matthew, we observe that the encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees was not a friendly one but rather hostile. Could they have had callous, unbelieving hearts and hard-headedness (or closed minds) too? In Hebrews 11:6, we hear the following: "It's impossible to please God apart from faith. And why? Because anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that he exists *and* that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him."

If someone won't even acknowledge your existence, it's rather difficult, if not impossible, to have any kind of significant relationship, isn't it? At least, if someone is angry with you, that person knows you exist and considers you worth being angry at. That's why the Psalms are such remarkable emotional testimonies of a relationship of a living God with

His people. The various psalmists run the whole gamut of emotions as they converse with God.

I mentioned earlier that being “chosen” by God carries weighty responsibilities and compassion. Imbedded in the character of God is a deep and abiding love for justice. Therefore, those who live in God’s presence in holy reverence, who follow the road God sets out, who love Him, who serve and who obey God -- they will seek to be like God. They will be carriers of God’s compassion and care in seeking the good of the defenceless and in doing so regardless of their own self-interests.

The United Church of Canada lives for justice issues. There are separate committees for racial justice, for Canadian justice issues, for ecumenical and interfaith relations, for global justice issues, for peace and demilitarization issues, and for aboriginal justice concerns. We do what we do in the name of justice because we love the God we experience in Jesus. He is the One who first loved us and chose us to carry His love to others and to love others ourselves. We are to be people who love justice, who make sure that orphans and widows, for instance, are treated fairly, that foreigners or refugees are cared for properly. In other words, we are to seek justice for all who are defenceless. So that is why we at O-YM have projects such as financially assisting Larry Scott of our congregation as an extension of our compassion for children in Kenya, such as our current project of Pikangikum (helping purchase school books for a fire-destroyed Aboriginal school) and such as assisting a refugee family make it through their first year in Canada.

We began with God and we end with God. God is the object of our praise. God is our Praise! Because we acknowledge God’s wonderful character of creative love and compassion, because we acknowledge God’s act of redeeming and saving love in Jesus, we reverently respect God with awe, serve God wholeheartedly and hold tight to Him as the Scripture encourages us – because God is worthy of our commitment to Him.

A minister once visited a children's Sunday school class and asked, "Why do you love God?" After a moment, a small voice came from the back: "I guess it just runs in the family." Love for God and love for others has run in God’s family for a long time – for centuries, for thousands of years. But even today we have this innate tendency to run from God’s love and be either callous or even casual about God’s love. And I sincerely wonder if war and its terrible consequences is one of the results of this running away from God’s loving expectations that could give life to everyone on Earth. Religion may have its conflicts. Jesus knew that so well. Jesus’ contemporaries also knew it. And, unfortunately, we know it too. But God’s love is so very different. We know what God expects from us. It is up to each of us to decide what to do.

In our Scripture from Matthew, Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important [command], the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself. These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them.'"

This is good news from the living God! Thanks be to God.

Rev. Chris Miller
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