

The Whole World

Leviticus 19:18b

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A young woman came in to the gynecology clinic with a great concern. She was pregnant, but in a visit to another clinic had been told the baby had no heartbeat. As she arrived in our clinic the team gathered around her to pray. We were praying that through the ultrasound we could hear the baby's heartbeat. We were also there so that if there was no heartbeat we could give this fearful young mother comfort and support. Dr. Reem set up the ultrasound and we held our breath. Then Reem showed the woman the ultrasound and said, "There is a heartbeat. It is strong. Thump, Thump, Thump." It probably looked a little silly to anyone watching, but all of us gathered around the young mom joined Dr. Reem in making a thumping noise. The young mother looked at the ultrasound, heard the good news, but seemed unable to grasp what she was hearing. And then tears formed in her eyes and a look of great relief and joy came over her face. All of us at her bedside joined her as we wept with joy. Then we prayed for this precious child that God was knitting together in this dear mother's womb.

The young mother was from Guatemala. I was with a team of doctors who had travelled from all over the United States to provide a four day clinic for the people in Guatemala, many of whom are too poor to find proper medical care. The group we travelled with is Faith in Practice. The image of the beating heart is one that will stick with me, and not just because of the incredible moment we shared as this precious young woman heard the heartbeat of her child. All throughout the week, as we gathered for a brief time of Bible Study and devotion in the morning, loaded up on our buses to travel to clinic, saw patients non-stop from the moment the clinic opened until it closed, and then returned to our base camp for dinner and a short night of sleep, there was a clear and steady heartbeat pulsing through our group. You didn't need a sonogram or an ultrasound or even a stethoscope to detect the heartbeat. The thump, thump, thump of the heartbeat sounded with a strong and steady beat. The heartbeat was the powerful love of God which gave strength and purpose to our team of volunteers.

Several years ago I received a doctorate degree from Austin Seminary. So technically, I was a doctor on this trip. But being among medical doctors, I was constantly reminded of a comment someone said when introducing me after I received my degree. "Wayne is a doctor, but he isn't the kind that can actually help you." Watching this team of medical doctors and nurses and willing volunteers provide real and necessary help to patients was truly an amazing experience. Our team couldn't address every medical need, but in some way every person who came to the clinic received some measure of healing, some measure of hope, and some degree of wholeness.

One of the key components of my job on this trip was to lead the morning devotions. I chose for our theme the verse from Leviticus 19 that says, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love your neighbour is a well-known verse because we find it in Matthew and Mark when Jesus states that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and the second is like unto it, to love your neighbour as yourself. We might also recognize love your neighbour from the passage in Luke 10 where an expert in the law is the one who mentions the great command of loving God and the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. That particular encounter leads to the telling of the parable we commonly call the Good Samaritan. So we likely are aware of and even familiar with the verse that says, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” But sometimes people are surprised to find that love your neighbour actually originates in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, in the 19th chapter and the 18th verse.

In his introduction to Leviticus 19 Jacob Milgrom writes, “*You shall be holy, for I, The Lord your God, am holy.*” Thus opens chapter 19, directing the people of Israel to model themselves after their God and to aspire to holiness. But what does it mean to imitate a deity in holiness? The rest of the chapter sets the people of Israel on the road to holiness.”¹ Chapter 19 in Leviticus directs the people of Israel to model themselves after their God. The chapter sets the people on the road to holiness. Instructions are given in chapter 19 about how to live a life that imitates the love of God, instructions about how to live as a holy people. And it is in chapter 19 of Leviticus that God gives the all-important commandment of loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. Of this verse Jacob Milgrom writes that it is the culminating point as well as the apex of Leviticus. He goes so far as to say it serves as the climax, and that those who practice loving their neighbour encounter this result: A giant step toward achieving holiness.² We might even say love your neighbour as yourself is the heartbeat of those who long to live faithfully as the people of God. Love your neighbour as yourself pumps life into the community of faith. Thump, thump, thump.

Leviticus 19 has very specific commands about how to be a holy people, and it really gets down to the nuts and bolts of our lives. Some of these echo the Ten Commandments and some expand and introduce familiar themes such as respect your mother and father (v.3); observe the Sabbath (v. 3 and 30); and do not steal, lie, deceive others, swear falsely, or defraud your neighbour (vs. 11, 12, 13).

¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Continental Commentary*, p. 212.

² Milgrom, 235, 236.

In Leviticus 19 we find these words, “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien.” (v. 9 and 10) It isn’t hard to see in these words that God is concerned for the poor and alien, and later when this command is given again we grow to see God’s concern for the widow and the fatherless. The people of God are called to set limits on our own consumption, to leave room at the margins, to find creative ways to provide for the ones who struggle, for the weak, the vulnerable, the ones without defence. It is in Leviticus 19 that we are called to treat the older members of our community with special dignity. “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly.” (v.32) In doing this we revere our God.

Leviticus 19 is concerned with how the people of God practice their ethics. “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.” (v. 15) “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight, or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights...” (v. 35 and 36)

With love your neighbour as the center of the chapter, these other, specific and ethical commands form a frame for how we live. One commentator emphasizes the importance of having both a center and a frame. “Without the frame, the summons to holiness too easily slides into theological abstraction, ‘faith without works’ as James puts it. Without the center, the summons to ethical relationships in the human community is cut loose from the anchor that provides its moral authority. ‘Let us love one another because love is from God.’”³ Love without ethics is mushy, and ethics without the driving force of love, the heartbeat of love, the thump, thump, thump of love can become legalistic, moralistic, and even harsh. But when you have the center and the frame together, love and the practice of love in real and genuine ways, you begin to live into the fullness of being the people of the God who is holy and who calls his people to share in that holiness.

Maybe that is what is so powerful about mission trips. You have the center, the heartbeat, the thumping of love that is intensified as you live and share the experiences with others in a unique setting, removed from many of the daily challenges and pressures, in situations where you are exploring the fullness of God’s love and sharing openly and honestly with others. And you have the frame, something very specific that you are working toward, something that actually brings the love of the neighbour to others in ways which meet very real needs.

³ Samuel Balentine, Leviticus (Interpretation commentary), p. 167.

On a typical day, which was not our busiest day, our medical team saw 360 patients, 145 of them in pediatrics, 74 in gynecology, 45 in dermatology, 66 in VIA Cryo, which screens for cervical cancer, 98 dental patients, with 179 tooth extractions. Over the course of our four days in the villages our lab team performed 127 urine analyses and handed out some 400 pairs of reading glasses. Our totals for each day were Monday: 528; Tuesday:629; Wednesday: 639; Thursday: 805, a total of 2601 patients in four days, and 330 were referred to surgery, which will take place over the next several months as surgery teams from all of the United States come to Guatemala and work in the hospitals.

In the midst of all of this tangible help, this very practical, hands on ministry that brought healing and hope to whole villages of people, in and through it all was the pulsing of the heartbeat. This wasn't work that was done out of guilt or a sense of duty or arm-twisting. The thump, thump, thump of the heartbeat, of love for the neighbour, was driving the work the team did. That was evident as the group worked late into the day, not wanting to say no to any patient, keeping the doors open till the last minute. It was evident in something I saw countless times when a doctor/patient consult was taking place. The doctors and medical personnel were leaning in, communicating a genuine interest and concern for each and every patient. It was painfully obvious when a nurse stepped into an empty room and broke down with tears. She was overwhelmed at the depths of need in the women who had come to the clinic. Four had been diagnosed that day with cervical cancer. She wasn't just practicing medicine. She was loving her neighbour, and to stretch out from the center, to cover the frame, sometimes our lives get stretched and we think our hearts will break.

I had my moment when a young girl was diagnosed with a spinal condition that was affecting her ability to walk. She began to have signs of this disease as an eight year old, and now at just eleven years of age she could no longer walk. Sadly, there was no healing for her that day. All we could do was give her a walker, and this beautiful little girl gamely made her way around the clinic...smiling. That morning one of our dentists pulled me aside before we went to clinic. She had travelled from Wichita Falls, and in telling some of her friends about the mission trip she was doing, someone gave her a Spanish language Bible and said, "Find the right person and give them this Bible." Because our dentist friend, Dr. Tina, was in clinic all day, she handed me the Bible and said, "Find just the right person." Watching the little girl with her walker, facing a lifetime of challenges, and smiling through it all, I knew who the right person was. I went in the dental clinic, waited for Tina to extract yet another tooth, and then told her to come with me. We found the little girl, whose name is Evelyn. We told her we had been sent with a special gift for a very special person, and that we felt like she was the person we should give the gift to. Tina took the Bible, placed it in the small hands of Evelyn, and we prayed for her. We couldn't stretch our skills far enough to cover the frame with

Evelyn. She was not healed that day. But something felt right about giving her a story that promises a healing not only for little girls with walkers but for all of God's precious children, a story that tells of a God whose love is so great he would send his only Son to save this world. I hope and pray, and I firmly believe, when Evelyn opens that Bible she will hear the thump, thump, thump of the heartbeat of God.

Would it surprise you to know that love your neighbour as yourself is actually only half of a verse, at least as that verse has been divided up in our current Bibles. It is listed as Leviticus 19:18b. It is the second half of verse 19:18. The first half says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people." Together the whole verse says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord." In this one verse we see the center and the frame. Any chance that loving your neighbour would be perceived as some shapeless love content with mere emotion and feeling finds the call to stretch that love out to its frame, to move from seeking vengeance to practicing forgiveness.

The morning our group looked at the verse about not seeking revenge we were gathered with members of our team who are not from the United States. These members of our team were Guatemalans. We had come to their country, to their home, as their guests. And that morning we reflected on a very sad, difficult, and painful time in the history of their nation. A Civil War lasting nearly 40 years tore at the heart of Guatemala. That war did not end until the 1990s. Civil War is devastating. It rips at the fabric of a nation. It destroys trust and it destroys life and it destroys relationship. Phil Johnson shared a deeply moving story of how key players in the leadership of Guatemala had to make the incredibly difficult choice to seek healing, to lay aside past hurts, to choose against vengeance, to ask forgiveness and to offer forgiveness so that their country could heal. The thump, thump, thump of love, neighbour love, love that comes from the God who forgives and tears down dividing walls and covers the sin and brokenness with the blood of the Beloved Son, that thump, thump, thump is bringing life in the years since the end of the war. People are choosing forgiveness over vengeance. People are choosing to work together rather than fight against. It was a precious gift that we were able to share in this miracle, the miracle of a heartbeat at the center making a frame of caring community. The name of the ministry we travelled with is Faith in Practice. Faith...the Center...in Practice...the frame.

We happened to be in Guatemala for the tenth anniversary of Casa De Fe. When people in the villages are referred for surgery, many of them come to the social hospital in Antigua, and while in Antigua they stay at the Casa De Fe, the house of faith. I couldn't help but think how the choice to forgive rather than seek vengeance is not limited to those in Guatemala. There is a chapel at Casa De Fe

that is dedicated to a young woman from Houston who was active in raising money for the house. This young woman was murdered. Her parents were faced with the agonizing choice of being consumed with a desire for vengeance or making a move toward forgiveness. One of the ways they moved from vengeance was raising the money for the chapel at Casa De Fe, a chapel built in honor of their daughter. Another was to become involved in a prison ministry in Houston. The heartbeat of the gospel, of loving the neighbour, beats strong in their lives, and it finds a frame in their work to help prisoners have a second chance and a new beginning. Faith in practice...it is beautiful, it is life-giving, and it is exactly what our God envisions for his people.

One day at our clinic we had a late arrival. Someone came to our dermatology clinic with an ingrown toenail. A doctor and a young resident stayed after hours to do the surgery. The rest of us loaded on our bus and came back to our rooms. The next morning at our devotions we began with a time of reflection, asking what we had witnessed, what we had experienced, what had touched us. After numerous comments the resident who stayed late the day before to work on the ingrown toenail spoke up. He said everyone else had left by the time the man came in to their clinic. It was quiet and getting dark. They took the man's feet in their hands and began to wash the man's feet. The young resident paused. The young resident stopped. He was visibly moved. Then he said, "As I held the man's feet in my hands I couldn't help but think of Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples. And Jesus told us to do that same thing for others." Faith in Practice. Why else are we here? What else were we created for?

This past year our team had a dentist who came with Faith in Practice for the first time. He was very interested in the practice part, but not so much in the faith. Each morning we have a devotional time as a group. That meeting is voluntary. That meeting is at 5:30 am. This dentist basically said, "Yeah, I won't be at that meeting." He really was not interested in the faith part of our trip. But boy was he committed to the practice. He worked in the dental clinic, which is pretty much pulling teeth, and he was there for the first patient and he stayed till the last one had come through. On the bus ride back and forth to the village he was animated and funny and just had a captivating personality. He was also true to his word. He never showed up for our morning devotion. We finished our work in the village, and it was Friday morning. We had a final devotional meeting before heading home. On that final morning devotional we give everyone who participated a cross, a small reminder of the heart of our work, the God who loved the world so much he gave his one and only Son. We had a cross for every member, even though we knew our dentist Terry would not show up, and probably had little use for a cross.

But God is the God of surprises. That final morning Terry showed up for the devotional. He took a cross when we handed them out. We had our bible study, we had some time for prayer, and then for the closing we sang a song. The song has a beautiful chorus that provides the opportunity to affirm our faith in Christ and our desire to serve the Lord. Terry, the dentist, was standing next to me. We were singing our song, “Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord? I can hear you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” As we sang, I heard this beautiful voice, singing louder than any other voice. I looked at the person next to me. I was pretty certain it was Terry, the dentist who said about the faith part of our trip, “Uh, not so much.” He was singing his heart out. And around his neck was a cross. Around his neck was the cross of Jesus. It turns out he wasn’t just singing. There was another sound coming from this dear man who discovered that life is not only about our practice, it is about our faith. The other sound coming from Terry was the sound of a heartbeat, a heart beating for Jesus Christ. Thump. Thump. Thump.

May God put that heartbeat in each and every one of us. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump thump thump until that day when the love of God covers this whole world and fills each heart with love of Jesus Christ. Hallelujah and thanks be to God.