Matthew 22: 34-46
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2026
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

I don't know if it's caught your attention, but it seems like there is a coarseness to our lives these days. "Coarse" is the word I hear used to describe our politics - a coarsening of discourse and discussion. The word harsh gets used to describe reality. There's a vulgarity, and I'm not just talking about the occasional foul word that slips into conversation, but a crassness and really more than anything a cynicism that pervades. It bothers me, though I don't consider myself very prudish (some would argue); I like to imagine that I have a decent tolerance for the rough edges, for the broken ways of being in the world. Hmm, *decent tolerance.* That's a funny turn of phrase given what I'm trying to say. My point is that I'm aware of it, I see it and feel it.

But what about you? Have you wondered about the lack of grace or kindness in both the small and large aspects of our days? I keep hearing people say things like *the cruelty is the point* and *business is just cutthroat* and *meanness isn't just a means, but is an end in and of itself*. Alongside these observations is a kind of collective throwing up of our hands and saying, what are we going to do about it? That's just the way it is. If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.

Let's pause for a moment and recall that while I'm making a point about our lives these days, there has never really been a golden era of civility. People have said hateful things and done hateful things since just about day two of the world as we know it. Sure, maybe the scale was smaller, or perhaps there were times when we hid our sins away under easier euphemisms, but the point is that maybe we're just kinda like this, kinda coarse and often unkind. That's certainly one way to look at things, and there's a good bit of evidence to support that view.

But I think there's also been a fairly consistent dissent channel, a place where the record has shown otherwise, a throughline that reminds us of other ways to look at and to be in this broken and bruising world. We receive a few short missives from the dissent channel today. Paul, not exactly always a dove and known for a polemic or two, living in a time of great violence, speaks up. He reminds us that he knows suffering and mistreatment; he's familiar with deceit and trickery, even as he tries to abstain from these tactics. "But," he and his fellow travelers call out, "we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children." So deep is their care and so determined to share themselves precisely because "you have become very dear to us."

I wonder about Paul. I wonder about a guy who has been the one to dole out abuse and vitriol and one who receives suspicion and abuse. He's arrested believers and been arrested; he's chased down and harassed people for their faith, and he's been insulted and run out of town for his own. He certainly knows something about a coarseness of discourse, about a harsh reality. And here in this letter to these friends in Thessalonica, one of the oldest, one of the first letters he wrote, here he writes about being gentle, and even tender, caring for each other as a nursing mother for her infant. To write about caring for dear ones, about sharing not just the

story of God but sharing our very selves. Paul holds on to a way of being vulnerable even when it doesn't seem safe and speaks of cherishing one another in an unkind world.

It's not the only notable dissent. We peek in on yet another back and forth between Jesus and this adversarial cohort. Question after question, everyone trying to trip each other up, to lay traps, to gain the edge or a piece of evidence that will finally take down this itinerant preacher. I do believe, though, that some of the guys are genuinely curious. Which commandment is the greatest? How should we live in this world of Caesars and empire and brutality? And Jesus reminds them that all of Scripture is a dissent channel. Love. Love God, love your neighbor. Love is the way; not advantage, not profit, not meanness. The law itself, the prophetic tradition, it's all a steady dissent to the idea that the hard and hardening way of the world is the way things have to be. We can live otherwise.

I learned a new word this week: *possibilistic*. Rabbi Shai Held considers that the Jewish tradition, the tradition upon which we build our Christian faith, is possibilistic. He writes, "the tradition is not optimistic about human nature, but it is stubbornly, insistently possibilistic. Its deeply held conviction is not that we will [always] choose the good but that we can do so. Although we so often fail, we are capable of succeeding. We can choose love." Rabbi Held joins Paul and Jesus and the canon of stories and commandments in offering an honest look at human nature. It's not always pretty. There is in us a capacity, Held says, for "unbridled cruelty and dreadful selfishness - and also of great kindness and immense generosity. We are capable of trampling on the poor and ignoring the weak - and of fighting for justice and siding with the oppressed. We are capable of reveling in our own prejudice and xenophobia - and of welcoming the outsider. We are capable of murderous hate - and also of prodigious love." Held says with not a little understatement, we are "excruciatingly complicated."

The claim of our faith, shared in and across the two testaments, is that we can be gentle in the world, that we are called to kindness and generosity, to love, to prodigious love. This is the dissent of scripture in a world that is callous and calculating. The stories, the very need for the law of love, suggest an honest take on the bleak fortunes and bitter lives that are on offer. Possibilism seems to be the belief that it's possible to live otherwise, even when it seems naive or somehow unserious to talk about love and tenderness. What could be more serious than the work of love?

Dissent channels are created so that a voice can call out that not everyone likes the plan. The dissent of scripture reveals that God's voice is calling out to us that we don't have to live like this - in this coarse and cutthroat way. Meanness does not have to prevail; we aren't somehow savvier when we choose cruelty or expediency. There's certainly no argument to be made that Paul is unworldly or that Jesus is naive. They both knew a thing or two about cruelty, and yet they do not bow to it. They insist on moving with gentleness, stubbornly offering tenderness in the face of a hostile world. God calls to us in and through our sacred stories, stubbornly insisting on the possibility of choosing love. What is the greatest commandment? How shall we live? In love, it's possible. Let it be true that though it could have been otherwise, we were gentle among you.

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Today’s a good day to take note and remember how the tenets of Judaism construct the very foundation of our Christian faith and practice while we listen to Jesus pull the deep wisdom from his Scriptures. It’s a good day to affirm the truth that it’s the same God in the Old Testament as in the New Testament, and that the God of all these sacred stories is a God who loves and who commands love. Jesus, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the lawyers and scribes, plus not just Moses and Joshua, but also Paul and most of the good people of Thessalonica are all Jewish. The source material of all that they believe is the story contained, so far, in the Torah, in the law codes, and in the prophetic messages. The ultimate division comes when some of these Jewish folk see that the God of love whom they have been listening to for centuries, when they come to see that *that* God of love is made manifest in Jesus.

Jesus is drawing out the wisdom of Deuteronomy and Leviticus to answer the question posed. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “’ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ (Deuteronomy) This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Leviticus) On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The history, stories, and laws of the Jewish people are sometimes strange and confounding, yet we see here that Jesus distills what matters most into the matter of love. Notably, none of his antagonists push back; this answer, “love God; love your neighbor,” is

received as a good and true answer by these faithful folk. The law is where they go to figure out how to live a good life, and the law reveals that a good life is steeped in the command to love.

Some weeks back, we found that the “big ten” commandments both assume and insist that a relationship between God and all of us undergirds everything, that the laws only make sense when we understand that we are loved deeply by a liberating God. And here we are reminded of the highest calling: we are commanded and called to love. And it seems fair to ask, is it love if it’s a command? Well, let’s remember that there’s a difference between a commandment to do or not to do and an embedded program. We are not robots or puppets who love without choice simply because it’s written down somewhere or even because Jesus reminds us that loving God and loving neighbor are mandates. Like all the commandments, we are given these laws as a divine gift, God telling us what God’s aspirations for us are, what God hopes we will do, who God hopes we will be. And then we make our choices to follow or not.

We hear the great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbors, and we choose to love or not. This is where the wisdom of possibilism shines through. We are capable of “great kindness and immense generosity [and also] of unbridled cruelty and dreadful selfishness.” As Rabbi Held points out, we are “excruciatingly complicated.” Yet for centuries, even over millennia, there has been a core insistence that we are capable of choosing the good. “The tradition is not optimistic about human nature, but it is stubbornly, insistently possibilistic. Its deeply held conviction is not that we will [always] choose the good but that we can do so. Although we so often fail, we are capable of succeeding. We can choose love.”

Scripture, sometimes baffling and often muddled, is quite clear here. The laws and the stories are deeply perceptive about human nature. And the deep history on display in this layered dialogue between Jesus and his peers is that there is a belief deep down that we are capable of keeping the commandments; otherwise, why bother handing them down? Otherwise, why bother questioning each other on their value? The commandments are relevant and accessible. God, in this way, demonstrates a belief in us - maybe more than we sometimes believe in God. God has faith enough in this world to ask of us a hard, but not impossible task. God knows the violence and callousness that we are all-too prone to, that our mistaken ideas about autonomy and control often lead us toward exploitation and a grasping, hustling cynicism. And yet God holds forth this alternative: that we remember that we are connected, belonging to each other and to God, and that love is the throughline in all our interactions.

Or rather that love *could be* the throughline. It lies within us to choose the good, to participate in the world from a posture of love. It is possible. It is possible to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind - to love God whole-lifedly as some have said. And it is possible to love our neighbors as much as we love our own little lives. It is possible to hang our whole lives on this. It may seem naive or unsophisticated to believe in love in this harsh climate, in this world of polarization and dehumanization and monetization. It may seem unrealistic to root all our decisions in love; it may seem that decisions about economics and politics and power and technology belong in a different lane, are somehow outside of love. But Deuteronomy and Leviticus and Jesus suggest otherwise. We can choose love, and we can choose love in every arena. All the law and the prophets hang on this; all our lives hang here.

You see, when we say the commandments are too hard or too old or too foreign or too contrived, when we say that humans aren’t capable of loving, when we say that it’s impossible

for us to love our way through the world, I think we're really just letting ourselves off the hook. We're untacking our lives from the central pegs on which Jesus said we ought to mount our lives. God believes it lies within us to choose love, over and over again. And if God believes it, it just might be possibilistic.

Much of this reflection is influenced by Judaism is About Love by Shai Held; the noted quotations don't capture the debt I owe to its insight.