

Jubilee

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 22, 2019 <> Mission Sunday II
Text: Leviticus 25:1-17

I am excited to tell you this morning that I have greatly expanded my knowledge this past week. But probably not in the way you might be imagining. Yes, I have been reading several books by Toni Morrison in anticipation of our *Books* group gathering this coming week and that has been truly eye-opening. Her gift of giving voice and realness to the black experience in America has been challenging to engage with, to put it mildly. But, that's not what I'm referring to.

Nor I am thinking about the disturbing and powerful series *Unbelievable* which I was able to watch this past week on Netflix. This is an incredible true-life story about what happens when just one young girl's attempt to report a vicious sexual assault led only to her further brutalization by the justice system. As a result, her assailant escaped detection and went on to become a brutal serial rapist who terrorized dozens of women in Colorado just a half dozen years ago. But, I'm not referring to this either.

No, my excitement with my expanded knowledge base comes from my exposure this week to the X-Men phenomenon and one character in particular named Jubilee. Hard as it may be to believe, I have, up to this point in my life, successfully avoided all

interaction with the X-Men of comic book, cartoon and feature films fame. Granted my exposure this past week was limited, since I only watched a compilation video of one of the tangential X-Men characters named Jubilee. Hey, it's a start... Suffice to say, an X-Men character was most definitely not what I was looking for in the way of a video link for the Sabbath Circles© Home Sunday School lesson for this week, but, then again, I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, Leviticus does not exactly lend itself to the kind of upbeat video links that work well in a Sunday School lesson. This is because the book of Leviticus is, in some sense, one of the more boring books in the Bible, concentrating as it does on religious and ritualistic practice and what are known as the Purity Codes and the Holiness Codes of the ancient Hebrew faith. Not exactly a bell-ringer which is probably why it is both one of the most important books in the Bible and also one of the ones least explored by local congregations. But, onward ...

I want to tell you a little about this Jubilee character I stumbled across this past week. She is a young girl, a teenager actually, from a wealthy Chinese family in LA – at least originally. Her parents die – I'm not sure how or why – leaving her an orphan. She escapes from state custody and takes up residence in a local mall, evading capture through the use of her particular mutant power – generating electrical shocks through her hands. She eventually becomes part of the X-Men group and is especially

close to the Wolverine. Time passes and all kinds of adventures ensue, most of which I know nothing about because I only watched a 4 minute compilation video. Even so I noticed something really odd. Jubilee's ethnicity changes. She went from being Chinese at her first appearance, to a sort of generic person of color and finally to a decidedly white person with dark black hair and a hint of Asian eyes. I found this really odd, and more than a little disturbing, as though her original ethnic identity was somehow a problem for the storyline. But, that's a subject for another time.

Jubilee, the X-Men character, tells people her name means celebration. Not exactly incorrect, but not really accurate either. A jubilee is a special celebration of some sort linked to a certain passage of time. For example, Queen Elizabeth II of England just celebrated her Diamond Jubilee anniversary of 60 years on the throne in 2012. So, a jubilee can be understood as a certain kind of anniversary celebration and, indeed, that is what it is in the biblical notion of jubilee described in this morning's text from Leviticus. But even that notion of a special anniversary celebration doesn't go nearly far enough in describing the extraordinary concept of jubilee as articulated in the Bible.

Jubilee as laid out in Leviticus is nothing short of a social welfare system for ancient Israel. Linked to the concept of Sabbath – as in the 10 commandments “Remember the Sabbath

Day to keep it holy” – Jubilee is actually a sort of super sabbath. Just like the weekly Sabbath Day was to be a day of rest and devotion to God, the joint concepts of sabbath and jubilee were about the same principle except counted not in days but years. In Chapter 25:3-4, the notion of a sabbath year is articulated. Basically it’s this: One can farm the land as usual for 6 years, but the 7th year must be a sabbath year in which the land is not worked at all. It must be allowed to rest. The produce the land produces on its own without cultivation may be gathered for food but the land could not be worked as usual. No pruning. No plowing. No formal harvesting. Complete rest for the land, every seventh year. Jubilee occurred when there had been 7 cycles of sabbath years or in the 50th year. But the jubilee year went even further than the sabbath years did. In the jubilee year, all agricultural work ceases, like in a sabbatical year, but that’s only the first step. Also, in a jubilee year, all debts are cancelled, all slaves and indentured servants are freed and ancestral property which had been sold reverts back to the original owners.

So, clearly, a jubilee year was designed to be a fresh start for everyone. As a laborer in the fields or the vineyard, you had a year to rest, only gleaning what grew on its own in the field. As a slave or indentured servant, you were literally given a new lease on life as a free person able to determine your own destiny. Even as a landowner, you had a fresh start to re-examine whether or not the

property you had settled on was where you wanted to remain. And, to be sure this system regarding the land was fair, the price of the land when sold would be determined in relation to how close the land transfer was in relation to when the jubilee year would occur. If the jubilee was years away, the price for the land would be more. If it was close, the price would be less.

Incredible idea, isn't it? A fresh start for everyone and everything once every 50 years. Sounds too good to be true. Well, in point of fact, it was. While scholars have found evidence that sabbath years were observed a few times, there is no proof that a jubilee year ever happened. Perhaps it did, on a small scale in just one area so insignificant it escaped notice. But whether or not it was actually put into practice does not change the reality of its description here in the book of Leviticus, THE book which lays out the rules for how God expects us to live our lives. Leviticus can be understood as having two parts. The first 16 chapters are a sort of manual for the priests in the ancient temple about how to conduct sacrifices, worship, etc. The next 10 chapters lay out what is called the "Holiness Codes" or the rules for living life according to strict rules on everything from what to wear (can't mix fabrics), what to eat (can't mix dairy with meat; no shellfish or pork, etc.), how to groom oneself (specific beard lengths), and of course the infamous sexuality codes – what is acceptable in sexual relationships, and what isn't. Leviticus is, in fact, where

several of what are known as the “clobber” passages used to decry homosexuality can be found. I mention that because I am continually astounded that the conservative Christians who are so quick to quote the clobber passages of Leviticus when it comes to same sex relationships don’t seem to know anything about the sabbath and jubilee passages which follow just a few chapters later. They also disregard all the other proscriptive passages which frame the clobber passages as though they are just as irrelevant as the sabbath and jubilee passages. Funny how some folks want to pick and choose which bible verses must be taken literally while others can be regarded as outdated and archaic, even when they’re right next to each other in the text. That seems rather opportunistic and self-serving, don’t you think?

The truth is Leviticus is the first place in the Bible where the notion of the central significance of loving one’s neighbor is first articulated. Jesus took that notion as one of the two key ways of professing one’s love for God: we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to *love the neighbor*, the other, as we love ourselves. Imagine that. Even the Leviticus texts on observing the sabbath years and then the jubilee years is a reflection of one’s love for God as paramount in our lives. They should be understood as tangible reminders that the land – everyone and every thing in the earth – does not belong to us but to God. By setting aside the use of them for one whole year on a

regular basis the people are living the truth that God is in charge of the land and everything in it. Not them. They are stewards at best. Sabbath and Jubilee are about God and God's sovereignty, about justice for everyone and not only the wealthy, about the notion that everyone deserves a fresh start now and then. How different our world would be if Jubilee had become the norm.

I was reminded of this stewardship piece of sabbath and jubilee as I watched the news coverage of the rally against corruption in New York this past Monday and then again by the worldwide climate strikes led by the youth of the world this past Friday. 20,000 people showed up to protest corruption in New York with not a lot of advance notice. Hundreds of thousands of youth walked out of school around the world on Friday to protest the worldwide refusal of adults to address this life-threatening problem. In all these rallies against corruption and environmental destruction, the echoes of Leviticus and the Sabbath and Jubilee years were ringing loud and clear. Cries for the justice they provided for millennia ago are becoming our reality today. Surely, with God all things are possible.

I was remembered powerfully of another bible story this week, one much more well-known than sabbath and jubilee. It's a story about a young boy named David sent out to fight the champion of a powerful enemy army. David, as we recall, prevailed against the gigantic champion Goliath against all odds.

I saw echoes of David this week in the incredible stories about the young climate activist from Sweden, Greta Thunberg. In just one year – ONE YEAR – she went from sitting alone with a sign outside the Swedish parliament to leading a worldwide movement that brought her to testify this week before the United Nations and the US Congress. She was treated rather condescendingly by a few of our esteemed congressmen but her response to their snarkiness blew them, and me, away. She told them, “I want you to listen to the science, not my words. ... I don’t want your hope. I want you to panic and do something.” I found myself wishing she had X-Men Jubilee’s super-power of shocking people and situations into submission. But then again, maybe she does. Let’s hope so.

We are in desperate need of a jubilee year in which there is a rest from the destruction of the environment, a rest from the greedy exploitation of people and creatures and the land that ultimately belongs not to us but to God. We need a 50-year sabbath from the hatred and division which arises when we refuse to work together to solve problems but instead just blame others. I’m ready for a sabbath from gun violence and the vilification of anyone who’s “different.” I’m ready for a jubilee year and all the work it will take to get ready for one. Are you? Here’s hoping... The thing is, how do *we* make it happen? Amen.