

The Most Important Work During a Pandemic

Psalm 100; Matthew 22:32-40

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In early April, during Passover, two synagogues in Huntsville were vandalized. I can stand in our church parking lot or my driveway at home and almost see Etz Chayim. The most vile, hateful messages were spray painted on the doors and signs of the synagogues. Rabbi Eric Berk from Temple B’Nai Sholom described it this way, “Our souls have been assaulted.”

Acts of hatred like this highlight two things. First, they are a reminder that ignorance and hatefulness cannot be eradicated. We think we are past that here in Huntsville, that we are a progressive, educated city and acts of hatred like that do not occur here. Well, they do. They occur here and in every community because ignorance and hatefulness cannot and will not be eradicated.

Second, events like this also prove that goodwill and brotherhood are more powerful. People from this community responded immediately with pressure washers and scrub brushes, food and drinks, and donations of money. Pastors of churches released statements condemning the vandalism. This community stood in solidarity with our Jewish neighbors to prove that goodwill and brotherhood are indeed more powerful than ignorance and hatefulness.

We’ve also seen this in people’s responses to the pandemic. This unprecedented time brings out the worst of human nature, and it brings out the best. We all must choose which we will be.

Our Judeo-Christian heritage guides us. Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

He reached deeply in his Jewish heritage and responded with a passage from Deuteronomy and another from Leviticus:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

I would say that is the most important work we can do, even during a pandemic. Love God and love our neighbor.

Rabbi Eric Berk became the rabbi at Temple B'Nai Sholom in 2018. He grew up in Dallas and came to Huntsville from Los Angeles. He is married to Shira. Rabbi Berk, I welcome you and members of Temple B'Nai Sholom to Weatherly.

Rabbi, it's a long way from Los Angeles to Huntsville. How are you and Shira adjusting to life in Alabama? And how are you and your congregation doing during the pandemic?

We were on a virtual panel together after the vandalization of the two synagogues. You said that the outpouring of love and support from the community almost made it worth going through the pain of the vandalization. Could you tell us some of what people in the community did to show support?

Jesus was Jewish. He knew his Jewish scriptures well. When asked what the greatest commandment is, he quoted the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6. Tell us about the role of the *Shema* in Jewish life.

When I was installed as pastor here over twenty years ago, Rabbi Steve Jacobs was one of the speakers. After 9/11, the Jewish community had High Holy Days in our sanctuary. And when my friend Rabbi Jeffery Ballon died, Ann Lois and the family had his funeral here. This congregation and your congregation have a long, supportive history. Would you say a word about the importance of interfaith work?

Rabbi Berk, I wish you, Shira, and your congregation well as we move through and emerge out of this pandemic. Thank you for zooming in to join me in the sermon dialogue. You can now tell your colleagues you have preached a sermon in a Baptist church.

It is important work. Loving God and loving our neighbor are the two most important things we can do. Let us choose to be the ones who live out of the highest, noblest ideals of our faith, especially during this pandemic. Amen. Be safe. Be well.