

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2017

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or

bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 5:38-48

[Jesus said:]

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Let us pray...Amen.

One of the reasons our Hebrew Scriptures are so important is that we can see the origins and roots of our own Christian faith in them. We don't follow the Hebrew Scriptures as our Jewish sisters and brothers do, since we have Jesus, and the gospels, and the letters of Paul. The Christian

Scriptures build upon the Hebrew Scriptures, and there is an obvious connection between the two: Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, who followed the Hebrew Scriptures. They were all he had.

But we have the books of the bible that chronicle his ministry and remember his words and deeds. When Jesus came and lived among us, it made the Hebrew Scriptures a little less important. Not obsolete, but they aren't the heart and soul of our bible, like they are for those who practice Judaism.

The rules we hear about in the Leviticus passage aren't foreign to us. Caring for the poor and the immigrants by leaving some of the harvest for them, telling the truth, leaving other people's things alone, watching out for the disabled, and the big one: love your neighbor as yourself. These are the faith guidelines Jesus worked with. These are the rules he lived by.

But as I have mentioned from time to time, when Jesus came to dwell among us, everything changed. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is very different from the God of the Gospels. God changed radically when God sent Jesus to live and breathe and minister among us.

When Jesus instructs the disciples, and us, through our Christian Scriptures, it is not through the blind following of rules laid down in Leviticus that instruct us, it is his interpretation of them, with his own perspective and wisdom added.

Leviticus is not meant to be a book of law for Christians, but as faithful followers of Jesus, it makes sense that we would want to be aware and sensitive to what Jesus was using as a basis for his own guidelines.

Much like our modern laws, which are based in Medieval law, we don't follow the ancient laws, we follow the ones that evolved from the ancient laws.

The intent of the ancient law is fairly clear, and for the most part, the Hebrew Scriptures and their laws make sense. Sometimes they do not. None of us have to worry about ritual cleanliness, dietary laws, and the kind of things that are specific to Judaism. But we can see some of the intent behind the compassion that comes from caring for the poor and the disabled.

But Jesus goes further. And where the Hebrew Scriptures cut right to the point by telling the faithful what they must not do, Jesus tells us what he *wants* us to do. There are 15 Shall Nots in our Hebrew passage, and there are 4 Shalls in our Christian passage.

Jesus turns the law upside down, inside out. He causes the faithful to think beyond what is written, and to contemplate our actions as they relate to our faith. While it may be easy to simply follow a list of rules, of do's and mostly don'ts, it seems much harder to turn the other cheek, to offer your cloak after your coat has been given, to go the second mile.

Loving our enemies? Pray for those who persecute us? Now what's that about? Those actions, those faithful actions, are based in the laws of Leviticus, but they go beyond the do's and don'ts. They turn the law on its head.

It's not easy to love our enemies, but if we think about it, Jesus has our souls in mind when he gave us this concept: what happens to our souls when we hold grudges, when we smolder with hate over something someone did to us? Our souls shrink and shrivel. We become consumed with the poison of bitterness. But if we were to find a way to be released from that poison, if we could find a way to pray for those who have harmed us, for their sake and for ours, well, we're not just following a list of rules then, we're actually practicing our faith, living out our faith.

Haven't we all had times when we seethed with anger toward someone who hurt us? Can't we all remember a time in our own lives when the grudge holding was harmful to our own souls?

Jesus understood that the key to living faithfully wasn't in hating, it was in loving. He understood that the key to living faithfully wasn't just following a law or rule, it was going beyond the intended letter of the law, to reach the person who has struck us on the cheek, or taken our coat, or asked us to go a mile, or asked us for money.

It's easy to see that what Jesus was talking about flies in the face of modern and conventional wisdom. If we live like this, we're going to stand out. We're going to be considered naïve. We're going to be thought of as victims. We open ourselves up to being ridiculed. If we live like this, we're going to be thought of as weird, out of step, maybe even unstable.

But we'll know better. When we try and live according to the guidelines Jesus sets forth, we know why. We know what the benefits are. Even if we can't do it all the time, can't we see neighbors, friends, and loved ones who have suffered in their quest for vengeance, suffered in their holding of grudges?

Jesus is offering us something both mysterious and practical: a path toward living our lives faithfully. The sun rises on the evil and on the good. And it's not up to us to figure out who is who. It's only up to us to love and pray for those who do evil to us. Not easy, but infinitely healthier for our souls!

Jesus says that even the most evil hearted tax collectors love their family. We can do that too. But we are called to love even those who intend to do us harm. To offer them our cloak, too. To go the extra mile. To show them that our faith means more to us than our thirst for vengeance....

Experts from the fields of education and parenting all agree: positive models of education and parenting are superior to negative models. Telling a child a list of things they can't do is simplistic and ineffective. Helping a child understand what they *can* do, will make the things they *can't* do irrelevant.

The same is true for God's faithful children: giving us a list of don'ts is simplistic and ineffective. Helping us understand what we *can* do on our faith journeys will make the things we shouldn't do irrelevant. If we love our enemies in the way Jesus intended, we won't even come close to doing the things the Leviticus passage says we shouldn't do!

God sends the rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous. In God's eye, there is no difference. The sun rises on the evil and the good. These things won't get sorted out until the final reckoning, and it's not our job to do the sorting. All we can do is faithfully journey forward, trying as hard as we can to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek.

Of course, as always, we can look at Jesus' instruction literally and metaphorically. Much has been written about what happens when someone strikes you, and you turn the other cheek. In the days that Jesus walked the earth, if someone struck you, and you turned your other cheek, you forced the person striking you to hit you backhanded. You only hit someone backhanded if they were your equal, so by turning your other cheek, you were going from a victim to an equal.

If someone takes your coat, and you offer them your cloak, you are going from being a victim, to being a benefactor.

In the complicated world of interactions and situations, cultivating an attitude of turning the other cheek rights the wrongs, balances the inequalities, elevates the lowly.

I invite each of us to look for ways that we can turn the other cheek, literally and metaphorically. To look for ways to offer our cloaks after our coats have been taken from us. To go the extra mile after we have been forced against our will to go the first mile. To love our enemies, and pray for those who have done us harm, for their sake as much as for our own.

Keep Leviticus in mind as the precursor, the foundation of the path we now follow. But we aren't practicing Judaism, we are practicing Christianity, so let your hearts follow Jesus as he leads us, into the upside down, inside out world of Christian thought, so that we may be children of God. Amen.