

Sermon Archive

Sunday 23 February, 2020

Lessons: Deuteronomy 19: 16-21

Leviticus 19: 18

Matthew 5: 38-48

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My sermon title today can be said in two different ways. One is as a prayer: “Jesus, this is really hard to do.” The second is as a profane exclamation: “Jesus, this is really hard to do!” For here we have two of Jesus’ most profound and difficult commands: “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies.” These sayings are what sets Jesus apart from almost all other religious leaders. This is what Jesus is known for. And, needless to say, this is really hard to do!

This morning I’d like to unpack these two commands a bit. In doing so I ask the question: “Who is my enemy?” That just might not be so obvious. Yes, we are familiar with the young lawyer’s question to Jesus that sets up the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s gospel: “Who is my neighbor?” But today we consider the question: “Who is my enemy?” And, in doing so, consider the very difficult task of loving that enemy.

First, Jesus’ command to non-retaliation. He begins: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” This comes from the passage from Deuteronomy we heard earlier. Right off we have some unpacking to do. This principle of “an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth” had a very specific legal application in ancient Israel. The main idea was to control retribution and revenge. You can’t go and kill somebody just because they hit you in the mouth or poked you in the eye. You take it to court and the court meets out justice, like for like. But there was an even more specific application of this principle. For ancient Israel, if you were taken to court by someone and that someone testified falsely about what happened, then you, as the wronged party, can get justice. Specifically the person who sued you would receive the same punishment he was looking to get from you, life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc. Furthermore, the law said that this was required - “show no pity,” it says. Sadly, in my country, people of color who are accused and/or arrested on false testimony very rarely get such satisfaction.

So, this is the context to which Jesus speaks. Basically, Jesus says, if someone accuses you falsely, don’t seek revenge, don’t even take them to court. If someone strikes you on the right cheek....

Right here we have an interesting twist. To strike someone on the right cheek necessarily meant that the hitting was with the back of the hand (one always used the right hand, never the left). To be struck with the back of the hand was an act of insult. In essence, Jesus says,

take the insult; don't look to get retribution, in court or otherwise. Instead....

Well, let's get to the really hard thing: "Turn the other cheek." Even more, staying with the court setting, if someone sues you for your outer coat, give him also your inner shirt (which meant, for all practical purposes, being left naked). In the law there was a provision to walk a mile with a person if they asked. Roman soldiers were said to take advantage of this law by making people carry their equipment for a mile. Jesus says, don't just go the mile, go the extra mile (even if they are a Roman soldier). Finally, Jesus says, give to anyone who begs from you or asks for a loan.

Yet he's not finished. Again, he says, "you have heard it was said." This time he repeats what we heard from Leviticus, "you shall love your neighbor." However, he adds this: "and hate your enemy." Now, these words are nowhere found in Hebrew scriptures. There is no direct command to hate your enemies. So we might ask: "What gives? Well, the consensus opinion of the day from scribes and rabbis was that if you love your neighbor, your friend, you must necessarily not love your non-neighbors, your enemies. You hate them. So, it was the understanding.

Jesus takes this understanding and turns it on its head. Instead of hating your enemies, you should love them, even pray for those who persecute you. It's easy to love those who love you back, he says. Even despicable people, tax collectors and Gentiles, love their friends. You should do better. You should love those who don't love you.

He concludes with a summary statement, one that summarizes all of these sayings: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now, "perfect" here does not mean morally perfect; it speaks of "wholeness." Jesus wants us to be "whole" people. Being whole is what makes for kingdom life. Life isn't about judgment, moral perfection, even fairness. Life is about living in relationships characterized by wholeness. That means going beyond the letter of the law, even as Pastor Jack suggested last Sunday.

Yet, this is really hard to do (Have I said that yet?). It's one thing to live out these norms amongst us, with people we know. How do we live it out in the world, in the world, where there are opposition and conflict and people who don't care about you? How does turning the other cheek and loving your enemies work?

In the USA, February is Black History month. It's sort of sad that we have to have specially designated observances or holidays to help us think about such things. Yet, it is helpful.

So, we recall the theology and strategy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His dream was that through the power of love and the action of nonviolent resistance whites and blacks would, one day, be able to sit and stand together as one people. In response to his critics, Martin once said, "I don't think of love...as emotional 'bosh'. I don't think of love as a weak force, but I think of love as something strong and it organizes itself into powerful direct action...There is a great deal of difference between non-resistance to evil and nonviolent resistance to evil."

Martin's philosophy of love and non-violence came directly out of this teaching of Jesus.

The strategy of active nonviolent resistance he got from Gandhi, but the philosophy came from Jesus. Loving your enemies was at the core of Martin's faith and he sought to apply it thoroughly and consistently. For Martin, love was the most powerful force on earth, and nonviolence was love expressed politically.

In 1957, Martin preached a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, entitled "Loving Your Enemies." He started with, "It's so basic to me because it is a part of my basic philosophical and theological orientation—the whole idea of love, the whole philosophy of love." He goes on to say that many would say,

that Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth.... But far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist. The words of this text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.

Given all that, I return to my question: "Who is my enemy?" In ancient Israel and in Jesus' time, the enemy was pretty straight forward - non-Israelites. The lines were drawn by race, ethnicity, and religion. People who did not follow Yahweh - Gentiles. Or follow Yahweh in the correct manner - Samaritans, although Jesus' dispensed with that division quite famously with his Good Samaritan story.

Throughout history these same lines have divided people into neighbors and enemies - "us" vs "them." Despite commands in scripture to welcome the stranger and the alien, people then and now, make "them" the enemy.

Sadly, my country's president caters to such divisions. May I say, we apologize for having inflicted this travesty upon the world. He has made it the center of his appeal to name and go after perceived enemies - Muslims and immigrants from Mexico and refugees from Central America and gays and Democrats and... the list seems endless. Indeed, of late, he keeps adding to his "enemies list," anybody who opposes him or disagrees with him or even says unkind things about him are enemies. And they must be dealt with accordingly. And there are many who cheer him on. Hatred is in full swing in my country.

And, sadly, tragically, that hatred is often expressed in violence. Your community knows that all too well. A year ago a young man came to this community and wreaked murderous havoc because he believed Muslims to be his enemy and out of his hatred determined that they must die. As we drove by one of the targeted mosques the other day, shivers went up and down my spine.

We, who desire to be people of good will, who seek to welcome the "stranger," who welcome the diversity that "the other" brings to our lives and our community, recoil in horror and lament to such blatant hatred. And, rather than regarding people who are different - racially, ethnically, and religiously - as enemies we see them as neighbors.

Yet, I wonder, might we who decry such hatred still have our own particular enemies.

Indeed, might our enemies be the very people who express such hatred. Is our enemy the white supremacist, the alt-right devotee, the blatant racist bigot who spews racial hatred? Or, closer to home, is our enemy our co-religionist, our fellow Christian, who harbors such hateful attitudes? To put a finer point on it, as a progressive Christian, is my enemy my conservative Christian brother or sister, figuratively and literally? And, if so, how do I love them?

In my disappointment and despair and anger about how many of my fellow Christians express their faith these days in my country, I can feel the hatred rise up, I feel the hate flowing through me (my obligatory Star Wars reference). How could 81% of Evangelicals vote for and continually support this hate agenda? I recently came across a *Hymn for the 81%* with these lines:

*Your fear had turned to hatred
But you baptized it with language
torn from the pages of the good book
You weaponized religion
And you wonder why I'm leaving
To find Jesus on the wrong side of your walls*

It's almost as if we have two different religions, doesn't it? And, yet, it does appear that our "enemies" are our fellow Christian believers.

What should we do? How should we respond? Well, to take Jesus seriously, we shouldn't seek revenge. Yet, I don't think we should allow ourselves to be slapped around and wallow in victimhood either. Indeed, I believe we need to stand firm against our fellow Christians. Maybe the way we are to love these 'enemies' is to resist, albeit non-violently, their misguided and hurtful ideology. Maybe we are called to love them with tough love. Indeed, it is not a strategy for cowards.

Returning to Martin, he suggested three ways that this might be accomplished. First, he said we must look within, "you must begin by analyzing self." Second, we must look to "discover the element of good in our enemy." And third, "when the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it." He concluded with these words (and with this I conclude my sermon):

I'm foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere, [people] of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom. We will be able to matriculate into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love our enemies, to bless those persons that cursed us, to even decide to be good to those persons who hated us, and we even prayed for those persons who spitefully used us....Give us this strong determination. In the name and spirit of this Christ, we pray. Amen.

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