

February 20, 2011

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Be Perfect

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” There is simply no way to turn the demands of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount into a series of rules, a series of laws. In Jesus’ mind there is simply nothing that can serve as a substitute for righteousness or right relation with God and neighbor.

It is amazing how creative we are at managing to make all kinds of things that are basically good into ways that we can avoid real encounter, real relationship with God and others. Perhaps you know someone who always has to talk about something that interests him or her without really engaging you. We call such people ‘boring’ because they take something that might be good and interesting and use it as a means of avoiding connecting with us. Or maybe you know someone who is only comfortable if she or he is in the power position in your relationship and so your boss is happy to talk about work and how he thinks about it, but is not able to communicate real interest in you. Engaging the other can be hard work, but is the way to real blessing. This is why we say at the heart of who we are as a parish that we are a worshipping community that grows in faith *through* or *by* engaging God and neighbor. This engagement is conscious and hard spiritual work as we remembered two weeks ago reflecting on how complicated it is to do justice; and last week as we thought again about the challenge of offering and receiving real forgiveness.

This week our attention is directed toward right relationship with those who persecute us or put us down or bully us or otherwise do us harm. Jesus remembers the ancient law of ‘an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth,’ which was a good law, a liberal law that said ‘you may only take an eye for an eye and you may not wipe out an entire family because of some minor offense. If you must punish your neighbor, at least the punishment should fit the crime.’ The law is neither an excuse for vengeance nor battle. Do not resist evildoers by doing evil to them. Instead, says Jesus, engage them, and by your actions show them theirs for what they are.

I am persuaded by the reading of this part of Jesus’ sermon that sees him as offering a way of non-violent engagement with those who would do us harm. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, it means that they have backhanded you as they would do to an inferior. If you turn the other cheek, you are not so much encouraging further violence as you are demanding that the person hit you, if they must, as an equal. When we turn the other cheek we are claiming our dignity in the face of those who would take it away from us. If someone sues you, they

could take your outer garment during the day as surety for a debt. So give them even more than they are legally allowed to take and show their oppressive behavior for what it is. Claim your dignity through engaging the one who would do you harm and bring you down. A Roman soldier could, by custom and law, conscript you to carry a burden, but only for a mile. At the end of that mile if you keep walking, it is not so much an act of generosity as it is an act that puts the soldier in a very awkward position of becoming a lawbreaker.

You may not hate your enemies. You must love them and pray for those who persecute you. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus in his beatitudes. We cannot say too clearly that this is not a commandment to grin and bear it. It is not a lifting up of a kind of masochism by which we are supposed to welcome suffering. And it is not a commandment to put up with our own degradation. It is once again placing before us the demands of costly relationship, of the kind that we see in God reaching over and over for us.

There may be a time in our compromised existence when we really have to separate from toxic relationships, but more often than not we are reminded that we find our identity and meaning in belonging to the people of God. And the community of God's people will inevitably have challenging relationships within it. Hence the gleaning laws of our reading from Leviticus. Remember the poor and the alien. Tell the truth. Do not defraud your neighbor. Pay what you owe. Deal directly with your neighbor even in reproof. Do not go around whispering and slandering behind his or her back. There is really no reason to hold a grudge. Do what you need to do for the good of the whole community. These are not mere rules by which we can justify ourselves, but demands that we strive for that justification that can only flow from the grace of God.

We've had the people of Egypt much on our minds in recent days. Protesters and military have shown extraordinary restraint in their efforts to avoid violence. They have engaged in a way that has brought about the possibility of real change for the better, but now have to do the hard work of sorting out how they will be community with one another as they move into the future. There will doubtless be various groups in that country jockeying for position and control over against their consideration of the good of the whole. There will be decent compromises to be made as long as there is connection in pursuit of the common good, but I have no doubt that the path forward will not be a straight one as they sort out what they are collectively *for* rather than only clear about what they are *against*.

The same goes for us in our most challenging relationships. It is all too easy to afford power to those who would degrade us by imagining our moment of sweet revenge, or thinking up ways in which we will punish those who have betrayed us, or turning our rage inward and subsiding into depression. Instead we must find ways of connection that show the behavior of the other for what it is so that they can do the work that they must do in allowing God to transform them, as much as we seek to be transformed into the image of God and freed to be the people we

were created to be ourselves. We will not be afforded our own dignity unless we claim it by finding ways to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile where we find the other difficult. *That* is where we will find our on growth in faith, for “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” and “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

In a time of silence for prayer I invite you to allow a difficult relationship to come to mind and ask God to help you see a way forward in which you claim your dignity in a way that the other is challenged and you stay connected with him or her. Ask God to show you how to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile for the building of the kingdom of heaven. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...