

7 Epiphany, Yr. C

Feb. 19, 2017

Leviticus 19:10-12, 17-18; 1 Cor. 3:10-11; 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

This morning, in the Matthew reading, we're hearing the end of the Sermon on the Mount, surely some of the most demanding and challenging and, in some ways puzzling, lines in the Scripture. We've heard the Beatitudes, those statements about being blessed or happy when we're doing things and living in such a way that the world around us would probably count as crazy. We're heard that we're supposed to be even more righteous than the Scribes and Pharisees, we're heard that we're supposed to love our enemies and in the last line of today's Gospel, we hear (good grief!) that we're supposed to be perfect!

I'd like to touch on each of these, but I'm going to start with the "be perfect" admonition. In Luke, this sentence reads, "be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful." In the Talmud, it reads, "be compassionate and merciful as your Father in Heaven is compassionate and merciful." And in the New Jerusalem Bible, this sentence is translated as "set no bounds to your love just as your Heavenly Father sets none to His." I'd like to make the case that here in Matthew, given the context, and all the talk about love, the translation from the New Jerusalem Bible is most accurate. Set no bounds to your love just as your Heavenly Father sets no bounds to His." Why should we love this way? Because that's the way that God loves and we, and everyone else, are made in God's image, meant to live God's life here on earth. There's also a language point to be made here. The Greek word for "perfect" has to do with the purpose for which something is made. It isn't so much about being without any moral flaws, but rather about fulfilling the purpose for which something or, in this case, someone is made. It means something along the line of being mature, grown up, complete, growing into what was intended from the beginning. So, the logical question is what's the purpose of my life? In the Wisdom class that Roger and I are teaching, that's one of the central questions. It's a question that gets asked in all the major religions and across cultures. I had to go back a few years to remember that catechism question – why did God make me? – And the answer – God made me to know, love and serve him in this world and to be happy with him in the next. OK – to know, love and serve God. Could we not say that that's a definition of perfection or holiness? To live God's life? To live as someone who's made in God's image? To, as much as possible during my lifetime, to transform my nature so that it matches up with God's.

And here we can see the tie to that command in Leviticus: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy, and to Paul's teaching to the Corinthians about being temples of the Holy Spirit. They are all tied together.

We rarely hear anything from Leviticus; only once in a three-year cycle. This morning's reading comes from that part of the book called the Holiness Code. Part of that code is concerned with ceremonial and ritual and part of it is about ethics but all of it, as you might expect given the name, Holiness Code, tried to answer the questions: what do you do when the HOLY ONE with all his majesty and glory and power, with his perfect righteousness, what do you do when that One comes to dwell among us sinners? So the priestly part of the code has to do with sacrifices for sin and rituals for worship and definitions of those things that were set apart, dedicated to

God's service and thereby removed from ordinary life. But the other part of the code comes from the prophetic tradition and there the concern is the kind of life people need to be living so that they can stand in the presence of this Holy God. So while the priests were concerned about the outward stuff, which guaranteed the necessary reverence and worship, the prophets kept saying, yes, that's necessary, but remember that it's ultimately about what's in your HEART that matters; ritual observances are reminders and help to get you to that transformation of heart that God desires, this God that says, "I want you to be holy as I am holy."

I think it's safe to say that most of us think that holiness is for people like Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama, but has little or nothing to do with us. But that's not what's being said here. You'll note that at the beginning of the readings, God tells Moses to say all this to ALL THE CONGREGATION. And it's seen as a very practical thing. When people are involved with one another, holiness is about love and love that's expressed in a very down to earth way: leave some grain at the edges of the field and some grapes on the vines for those who have nothing; in your relationships with one another, don't lie, or defraud or steal. Act reverently toward those who are disabled, either physically, like the deaf and the blind, but also those disabled by poverty – like the laborer who doesn't have enough to be able to wait until tomorrow to be paid. Act justly, without partiality. And for those who think the OT is about law and the NT about love, you'll note that it's here in the OT that we get that first statement of the necessity to LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR as yourself. And even more amazingly, a few verses later, there's a further injunction to love the aliens among you as you love yourself.

You can see the tie here to the command to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, who like legalists throughout time, try to pin down exactly what we HAVE to do. The ever-present temptation to put the letter of the law above its spirit. There's a Rabbinic story about a Rabbi who wanted to study the Torah, but had no means of support. A rich man in the community offered him a place to stay and supported him through long years of study. After a while, the rich man decided to see what the Rabbi had learned, so he sent a prostitute to visit him. The Rabbi chased her away with a stick, wanting to defend his purity above all. But the rich man sent him away because, he said, that all those years of study had not taught him the kind of holiness that would have welcomed and reached out to a fellow human being. But the love/holiness command, especially the unbounded love command in Matthew is a far cry from simply studying and parsing of the law. It demands a whole-heartedness, a magnanimity toward God and our fellow humans. That kind of love, as you know, has to do, not with warm and fuzzy feelings, but often with an act of sheer will, with gritted teeth as it were. This kind of love has to do with willing and working for the well-being, the flourishing of our fellow humans. It has nothing to do with what's in it for me, which is where we usually go first. It has only to do with loving in the way that God loves, as we heard in the Gospel, sending his benevolence, his goodness, his rain, upon the just and the unjust alike. Willing the well-being of the other. Even the enemy. How hard is that? And willing the well-being of the enemy has to do with praying

for him, but not the prayer that says, "I hope he sees the light!" Instead it's the prayer that wills his flourishing. I would point out here, though, that this DOES NOT mean getting whatever he wants; it means his well-being in his own journey to spiritual wholeness. And, therefore, this kind of love includes challenge and correction. As someone, talking about tough love pointed out, we would question whether parents who allow their kids total free rein are exhibiting any kind of true love in that permissiveness. But willing the well-being of the enemy, of those different from us, to say nothing of working for it, is incredibly hard. We seem to be hard-wired to think of ourselves first. I saw a cartoon that was a comment on the political arguments we hear about budget cuts. No words, just a pie chart, with a small wedge in it. The wedge was labeled "the things I want" and the rest of the chart, about 90%, was labeled, "waste."

Paul touches on this kind of impartial loving when he reminds the Corinthians that they AND OTHERS are temples of the Holy Spirit. It was a pretty radical statement because the temple was still standing in Jerusalem. But Paul is saying that God isn't stuck in one location, in a building in Israel, but lives in holy people, in a holy community. Your calling, Paul says is to live in a way that you're showing this to the world. As Matthew said last week, you're called to be salt and light, called to manifest God's face, God's love to the world. In this way of thinking, every person can be a sacrament, a sign of God's presence. Once in a while, we see people borrowing from the Eastern tradition and performing a bow, a Namaste, which says that the God in me recognizes and honors the God that is within you.

And finally, a word about how this connects to the Beatitudes. One might think that this kind of life would be, not only difficult, but pure grind. But Christ says it's the opposite. Because your purpose is to show God's face to the world, that's where you'll find your deepest fulfillment and your greatest joy. Because you'll come to put on the mind of Christ and live in the heart of God, you'll live a life, as the beatitudes say, of blessedness and happiness and receive those gifts of God – peace, joy, salvation.

We can't do this on our own. But we're not on our own. We've been given, as the collect says, that greatest gift of the Holy Spirit, which is love, without which our lives miss their true purpose and, without which, again the words of the collect, whoever lives is accounted dead before you. That's not our call; that's not our purpose; that's not our destiny. Instead, we're called to abundant life and abundant love. We're called to live in the very heart of God. Amen.