

02/23/14 -- Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

“Turning Away from Hate, Revenge and Exclusion” - Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Next week is Transfiguration Sunday, where we celebrate the revelation of Christ as the culmination of God’s Law and God’s prophetic work in history, and where we acknowledge that Christ is the image of who we are becoming as his followers. I look forward to talking about the Transfiguration, in part because Epiphany becomes a long walk through judgment, Law and being constantly confronted with our inability to live up to a thousand standards that are far too high to reach. Or so it seems to me.

Really, though, these difficult verses in Scripture are about how hard it is to see Jesus in our daily lives. It really is as difficult as it sounds; and it really is as simple as turning toward Christ over and over again. To be honest with you, I tend to fall toward the difficulty side more often than the simple side.

There is a story about a Native American who was visited by a missionary. The missionary was simply there to convert people and so he sat down with the man and began to talk about God and Jesus and what it means for a person’s soul. The Native American said, *“So before you told me any of this, I knew nothing of sin and hell and Jesus, right?”* The missionary said, *“Yes, that is true.”* Then the Native American said, *“And if I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?”* The missionary said, *“No, you would not, if you did not know.”* *“Then why did you tell me? I was better off not knowing anything at all.”*

I believe many of us feel like the Native American. It may have been better for me if I had never heard about all these difficulties in following Jesus during Epiphany. It sounds bad. Last week, we had to cut off hands and pluck out our eyes. Burning in the fire was mentioned a few times. This week, we have to love enemies and be perfect. And then there is Leviticus. When was the last time we read anything from Leviticus on a Sunday morning?

The presence of Christ throws our world into high relief. It also throws our souls into high relief. Jesus is like a very bright light that sends a wide beam into the darkest parts of our lives. It lets us see what is true light as beautiful and true and good, and what is really darkness as a very deep shadow in the midst of the light. It is not that we are judged by Christ, but rather that the very presence of Christ lets us stand in judgment of ourselves - if we let him shine in our lives. Remember John 3:

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil...”

In Christ, once we face our personal enemies within us, once we take some responsibility for those who have harmed us and once we include those we would rather

exclude from our lives, we begin to see that we, as Paul says, “*are God’s temple*” and are therefore holy. And Leviticus says,

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

Living in holiness is the recognition that Christ is around all, in all and through all things. Paul says that because Christ belongs to God and we belong to Christ, we therefore possess all things. They are all ours. The world, as they say, is at your fingertips because it has been given over to you through Jesus Christ.

But Paul has a caution embedded within his words about who we are in our Christian lives. In verse 19, he says,

“Do not be deceived!”

Self-deception and deception that wiles its way into our lives through spirituality are very convincing. Those deceptions derive out of self-love, the love of self, the curving in upon the self as Luther called it. Our inability to see beyond ourselves and the things we have become the root of our hatred toward others, our need to exact revenge and our exclusion of others from our tribe or self-defined group of influence. Isaiah 5 gives a similar warning, when he says:

*Ah, you who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter! (Is 5:20)*

These are the things Jesus challenges us with today. Someone has done something to me that I do not love. They have harmed me in some way, so I want them to pay me back in an equal way. But Jesus says,

“Do not resist...turn the other cheek...give over to the one who has taken from you more than they have taken.”

It is easy for me to show compassion toward those who are like me and are part of the same things I do, but Jesus says,

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

We perfect ourselves by doing the things Jesus did and does. It is a great and holy

challenge. GK Chesterton once said,

“The Bible tells us to love our neighbors and to love our our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.”

Let’s reflect more closely on some of our words today. Jesus says,

“You have heard it said to love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

Did you know there is nowhere in Scripture where it says *“hate your enemy”*? **(repeat)**

Why would Jesus say that? I think it is because of how we hear things. The teachers of Israel *heard* our reading from Leviticus *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* and then *in action* took it to mean *hate your enemy*.

In other words, we hear God say one thing, then we make assumptions about it and then act according to those assumptions. We hear *love your neighbor* and, in those words, we *assume* it to mean *hate your enemy*, and then we act that way.

But that is not what Leviticus says at all. Before Moses speaks God’s word saying

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”,

he has made some pretty radical statements about how to treat other people.

The poor must be provided for; judgments cannot be made on the determination of wealth; profit cannot be made on the reputation of another or on the blood of another; revenge and the holding of grudges us not acceptable. We presume the neighbor to be anyone who is *like me*, anyone who lives with or near me. But a few verses later, it is made pretty clear that *neighbor* more likely means *anyone who is NOT like me*. Leviticus 19:34 says,

“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

It is precisely the ones we would exclude that we must include. They are our neighbor.

Leviticus and Jesus ask a lot from us today. In fact, we must give up a lot in order to extend ourselves into the holiness of God. John Calvin says,

“Nothing is harder than for (people) to divest themselves of their carnal desires to prepare for imitating God” (Commentary on Leviticus).

A few moments ago, I said a lot of the difficulty is in how we hear things. When we hear the phrase, “*Love your neighbor as yourself*”, what do you hear?

I want to suggest something by way of our friend Calvin that is pretty spectacular related to this verse about *loving yourself*. We hear this phrase and I think many of us do what I do:

You try to figure out what it is that you love about yourself, then you think about what that means and what it is like, and then you try to be like that with your neighbor or the stranger. (I think most of us here are pretty good with understanding that neighbor means anyone outside the walls of the church.)

This is the traditional modern reading of Leviticus and Jesus’ words. Many of you have heard it said, “*You have to learn to love yourself first.*” **(talk about New Age movement, etc. here, for a few minutes)**...and right there is the deception.

What if these words about loving the neighbor as yourself means *exactly what it says*?

What if all our difficulties have come about because we have misheard what it means to ‘*love yourself*’?

Let me help. If all those acts and feelings of hatred against your neighbor, if all those desires for revenge and restitution against your neighbor, if all those needs to exclude others because they are not like you derive from what I said earlier - *self-love* - then the phrase “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” changes considerably, doesn’t it?

Loving your neighbor as yourself means, rather than trying to figure out how to love yourself more, it means instead to always substitute *neighbor* for *self*. The reason is because God, Moses and Jesus all know that we are incapable of seeing beyond ourselves. We are consumed with the self. We *want* God to love the things we love and so we assume that to be the case. That way, we can condemn all those who do not love what I love, because what I love is what God would love.

Do not be deceived, Paul tells us. What is the root of all deception? Deception is most effective when it derives out of self-love, or when, in our attempt to deceive, we appeal to another’s love of self. We weave the tapestry of self and substitute it for reality, then ask others to believe it to be so. Calvin says we

“*seek to cloak (our self-love) by the outward appearance of religion*”.

Moses and Jesus, though, ask us to do something else. They ask us to, whenever we are seeking to fulfill our love of self, we instead substitute our neighbor.

Those things we would give only to ourselves, we give to our neighbor instead.

Those actions which serve only ourselves, we instead do them for our neighbor.

Those thoughts and words that only serve to boast of ourselves, as Paul says, we instead use to speak well of our neighbor and others.

Wherever *I, me, myself* is taking precedence, I substitute *you, them, Other*.

So now you know, just like our Native American at the beginning of the sermon.

Like him, you are probably better off not knowing. But now we know, as we seek to share the mind of Christ, that we make all kinds of assumptions and presumptions based on what we hear God saying to us in Scripture.

We do it with one another; why would it be different with God?

But now we know "*Loving yourself*" has everything to do with how we keep ourselves from the temple of God Paul calls us to today. Contrarily, when we substitute that love of self with our neighbor, we begin to enter the temple of God. In fact, we *become* the temple of God.

Jesus is always pushing us outside of ourselves, always throwing us out of the nest before we are ready. It is really an act of love, because these are the ways of God. God gives unconditionally. Jesus points beyond himself to the ways of God, in such a way that when we see him we are seeing God. The Holy Spirit calls us to always be pointing away from ourselves to the Other, to the neighbor, for it is in that action that Christ becomes present in our relationships with one another.

To do this over and over again is how we stretch ourselves into the perfection of God. It is how God perfects us. It is how we become perfect, just as our Lord and God is perfect.

Amen.