

"Christ and Culture (Who Are My Enemies?)"
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 19, 2017
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Holy Scriptures: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5: 38-48

Ritual and Moral Holiness

Leviticus 19

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.

9 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. **10** 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.

11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. **12** And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. **14** You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

15 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. **16** You shall not go around as a slanderer^[a] among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood^[b] of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. **18** 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.

Matthew 5:38-48

Concerning Retaliation

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; **40** and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; **41** and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. **42** Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** 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. **46** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Christ and Culture (Who are my enemies?)

Whom do you perceive to be your enemies?

Does this sound like an odd question to ask

for a Sunday morning spiritual message on Christ and Culture?

We invest a lot of energy in faith communities and in our culture
defining and discussing who is our neighbor.

Which is a very good thing, don't get me wrong.

A serious part of our story, our faith journey, our relationships,
our daily walk of life involves enemies,

whether the enemies are real or perceived or imaginary,
whether they are within our hearts and minds

or seeking devious ways to mess with our hearts and
minds...

and livelihoods.

Enemies can be a source of conflict, chaos, and catastrophe.

They can be distracting, damaging, and divisive.

They can bring harm, draw energy from hype, and use hatred to perfection.

They can leave behind a wasteland of brokenness, resentment, and disheartened.

Good News!

The Holy Bible does not back away from a fight;

the Word addresses the troubling reality of enemies in our midst.

Throughout the Holy Scriptures

enemies are discussed, lampooned, warned against, overcome,
cast down, cast out, cast aside, and even cast into the sea.

Some have said that Public Enemy Number One in the Bible and in life
has many names and faces:

the Devil, Satan, the Tempter, Lucifer, Legion, and so forth,
you name it, The Enemy will show up
and make himself – or herself -- at home.

From the snake in the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the opposing forces in Revelation,
from the Pentateuch to the Psalms,

from Jesus of Nazareth to the Apostle Paul,
from the first spiritual stories set to papyrus

to God's Word that is still speaking in the Church today,

enemies seem very real and very close and

very scary.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the Old Testament,

Yahweh is presented as a protector against enemies,

as one who does battle against enemies near and far.

The Lord gives the Israelites strength to persevere against their enemies,
who are first and foremost the enemies of God.

Exodus 23:22

*But if you shall indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak,
then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries.*

Deuteronomy 20:1

*When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses, and chariots,
and a people more than you, be not afraid of them: for the LORD your God is with you,
which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*

Isaiah 59:19

*When the enemy shall come in like a flood,
the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him.*

Psalms 23: 5-6

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Now as we move into the New Testament,
observe the difference in tone and tenor and tenet
as the talk of conquering enemies shifts toward building relationships:

Matthew 5:43

*Jesus said, "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,*

1 Peter 3:9

*Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing;
but contrariwise blessing;
knowing that you are thereunto called,
that you should inherit a blessing.*

Romans 8:35, 37-39

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
No, in all these things
we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
For I am sure that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

Through the grace of Jesus Christ we are called to not render evil for evil,
to love our enemies, to affirm that no one and nothing can separate us from
God.

Even so, this is so tough,
especially when you believe that your enemies
have or will or may hurt or harm you in some way, shape or form.

So tough.

When you were asked a few minutes ago 'who are your enemies?'
an image or a name or a memory flashed through your mind. Yes?

Maybe the image or memory is painful,
or comes with a sense of fear, or loathing, or disappointment.

We are in a safe place, a sacred space, to gather together
to prayerfully and honestly address life's joys, challenges, fears, and faith.

Let's see if we can find some balm of healing and help and hope.

Let's start with the Holiness Code found in Leviticus.

"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.*

Listen for what follows:

at the core is mutual respect and recognition.

And isn't that what everyone wants?

To be respected and recognized? To love and be loved in return?

9 *When you reap the harvest of your land,
you shall not reap to the very edges of your field;
...you shall leave (gleanings) for the poor and the alien:
I am the Lord your God.*

11 *You shall not steal;
...you shall not lie to one another:
I am the Lord.*

13 *You shall not defraud your neighbor...:
I am the Lord.*

15 *You shall not render an unjust judgment;
...with justice you shall judge your neighbor...:
I am the Lord.*

17 *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin...*

18 *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.*

May we never, ever take this code for granted.

This code, my friends, is the very core of the Judeo/Christian ethic.

This is the Holiness Code,

a holy code of ethics we can live by...and live with...and live into...and live for.

The Holiness Code is a training manual for how to be loving and faithful.

These are spiritual instructions on how to live in community

and get in tune with God's will for life and love

Clearly the Holiness Code impacted Jesus of Nazareth.

God's word and will are not limited to "faith professionals"
such as Levite Priests, Pharisees and Scribes;
the Law and love of God is a blessed gift
to one and all, for the common good.

Jesus of Nazareth was moved by Leviticus 19: 18:
*"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people,
but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,
*"I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be children of your Creator in heaven;
for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."* (Mt. 5: 44-45)

Or, as we say here in the South,
God sends pollen on the just and the unjust.

Jesus took the Holiness Code to a whole new level.
Jesus realized that when the Levite priests offered was not simply a priestly code,
a set of rule for clergy to live under,
but a methodology for the whole people of God.
He turned the Levite Priests' code of ethics for the Jewish community
into a mantra for peace, for shalom, for wholeness in all of creation.
*Love your enemies,
and pray for those who persecute you.*

Radical.

Jesus Christ gleaned the essence of the power of the Spirit in the Law of Moses
and set it before his disciples, his followers, his listeners,
all those overhearing from tree branches,
those peering out from behind their mother's skirts,
those hearing the Good News today.

You are holy.

You are blessed.

We are blessed!

We are salt and light!

We are empowered and commissioned to serve, to love, to learn and to build up.

We are a ministry of believers – and doubters, of wonderers and wanderers.

We are a movement for holiness, a priesthood of all believers.

Let the Holiness Code come alive in us by the way we behave in community.

A healthy, healing community will be realized, will be made manifest and tangible
when people choose to live under these precepts,
these standards, these instructions we now hold in common.

Acting in a holy manner by its very nature effects hatred and harm;
those who would hate and do harm
may be impacted to the good by those who model love and grace.
What happens to your foe when you treat him or her as a friend?
When you do not render evil for evil?
Someone once said that those whom we think of as our enemies really are our
teachers;
whenever we meet with resistance
we encounter teachable moments, teachable experiences.
We can grow through this...and maybe our enemies can, too...
We are to seek to reconcile by loving our enemy and praying for those who persecute.
Love is made real in the act of forgiveness.

Mumford and Sons is an amazing band.
Truth be known, I told my daughter Katie that Mumford and Sons are from Georgia.
I think every great band is from Georgia 'cause I want them to be homegrown talent.
Luckily Katie's friends informed her that Mumford and Sons are from Ireland.
Silly Daddy was wrong, as per usual.
Check out these lyrics from their song "*I Will Wait*"

*I came home like a stone
And I fell heavy into your arms
These days of dust which we've known
Will blow away with this new sun
And I'll kneel down
Wait for now
And I'll kneel down
Wait for now
So break my step and relent
You forgave and I won't forget*

Thank you, Jesus.
Thank you, Mumford and Sons. "*You forgave and I won't forget.*"
Forgiveness lives on and on and on.
I will never, ever forget that you forgave me.
The gift of forgiveness that you give away lives forever.
When we forgive someone else,
they are empowered to believe, "You forgave and I won't forget."

When it comes to dealing with our enemies, we have a choice of weapons.
Revenge? Retaliation? Resentment? Returning evil for evil?
Or do we receive Jesus' Holiness Code? Reconciliation? Forgiveness? Repentance?

What happens inside our souls when we choose to hold on to every slight that stung, every sharp word that cut, every "glove that cut us until [we] cried out in our anger and our shame..."? *(Paul Simon)*

At times we have chosen to make saints of our enemies,
 lifting them to life everlasting status, a story we repeat often and loudly.
Or we can choose instead to pray for them,
 to not resent them,
 to release their negative energy,
 to let go and let God,
 to take on an attitude of gratitude
 that lessons have been learned and life is good.

The promise of Easter is that death has lost its sting.
When Jesus was crucified he could look down
 and see his enemies casting lots for his clothes.
Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"
That day on Calvary Jesus Christ died,
 but his faith and his life's work lives on.
When Jesus was on the Cross He could also look up and see the heavens.
His resurrection from the dead into life after life
 proved that there is life after encounters with enemies, as well.
Neither death nor evil will have the last word, the last say, nor make the last point.
The Good News is that no matter what happened in our past,
 God and God's people are fully committed
 to changing our present for the sake of the future, where hope is alive.

The past is a teacher of new beginnings.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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*Go out in the neighborhood.
Empower people to love each other.
Help them listen for their call to be the people God created their souls to be.
Teach them by your actions about God's unconditional love for each and all.
And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the age.*

— The Great Commission Based on Matthew 28
According to First Christian Church, Decatur, Georgia