

Sermon – “Going the Second Mile”

Sunday, February 23, 2014

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

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is found in Leviticus, chapter 19, verses 1-2 and 9-18. Leviticus appears only once in the entire Revised Common Lectionary cycle, and in most years, Lent begins before the seventh Sunday after Epiphany, so Christians rarely listen to these words. This is unfortunate because we miss getting a glimpse at the heart of Israel’s theology in the Holiness Code and seeing the parallels between the words of Moses and the words of Christ. Moses calls the people of Israel to acts of kindness, social justice, honesty, fairness and forgiveness. In doing so, the people reflect the character of their God, who is holy and who calls them to holiness. Listen now to God’s word recorded in the Book of Leviticus.

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 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 among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood 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. Amen.

Our gospel reading for today is found in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 38-48. Matthew has recorded a number of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, which challenge us and call us to reflect the character of Christ. Today’s reading includes two of the six antitheses Jesus’ presents: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...*

In the antitheses we read last week, Jesus shares insights on anger: *You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder;’ But I say to you...’if you are angry...if you insult...if you say, ‘You fool...you are liable...*

Jesus shares insight on lust: *You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery;’ but I say to you...everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery...*

Jesus shares insight on divorce: *You have heard it say ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate...But I say to you...anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to commit adultery.*

Jesus shares insight on oaths: *You have heard it said, ‘You shall not swear falsely,’ but I say to you...’do not swear at all.’*

In the antitheses we read today, Jesus shares insight on revenge and loving one’s neighbor. Rather than reading these words literally, one is encouraged to hear the call to a new way of life...a life that is willing to “go the second mile.” Hear now God’s word.

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. **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 God makes God's 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Going the Second Mile"

Text: "...and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second." Matthew 5:41

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, We thank you for believing in us and for expecting more of us than we expect of ourselves. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The classic children's story "The Hare and the Tortoise" has always been a favorite in the Kieffer household. I suppose we like it because it's not about being the fastest or the most clever, rather it is about being persistent and intentional. The tortoise wins the race through a spirit of determination and continuity....walking each mile (one step at a time). The tortoise wins the race by recognizing his weaknesses and playing to his strengths.

Christ expects this of us, if nothing more, in the Sermon of the Mount. Recalling the laws of Moses, who also ascended a mountain, we see parallels between the teachings of Christ and Moses in the call to be holy, even as God is Holy. Today I would like to share some commentaries on these verses, simply because they are complicated and need some clarification of the context in which they were written.

Concerning anger... Jesus believes that God not only condemns abusive language, physical violence and murder, but God condemns the anger that gives birth to this kind of destructive behavior. Is anger a sin? Anger itself is not a sin, it is an emotion...one that we all experience. Having insight and learning how to process our anger in healthy ways is "going the second mile." Jesus invites us to own, explore, understand and take responsibility for the anger that is ours.

Concerning adultery... Jesus understands that the commandment prohibiting adultery was not about lust. In first century Middle Eastern culture, a man's wife was his property. He owned her. Adultery was theft. Jesus, however, is concerned about lust because it trivializes a woman. As Matthew makes clear, it is not a sin for a man to look at a woman or for a woman to look at a man. It is not a sin to be attracted to another human being and to appreciate God's good creation. What is prohibited is looking for the purpose of lust. Jesus requires a new kind of self-discipline in his followers. Jesus requires second mile relationships.

Concerning Divorce... There were no laws prohibiting divorce in Jesus' day. Divorce is regulated in Deuteronomy 24. Women, of course, as property, had no right to divorce. On the other hand, a man could divorce his wife on a whim. Jesus addresses this double standard. His prohibition of divorce, both recognizes God's intention for marriage as a lifelong commitment, and advocates for women who had no power in the legal system. Jesus' words prohibiting divorce are not intended to be a legal mandate against divorce. As painful as divorce is, there is a time for divorce. As a community of faith, it is crucial that we go the second mile in respecting and supporting those among us whose lives have been touched by divorce.

Concerning oaths... Jesus expects integrity in his followers and a simple 'yes' or 'no' is encouraged!

Concerning revenge ...Jesus lived in an “honor-shame” society. The defense of one’s honor often resulted in retaliation and revenge. In ancient times *an eye for an eye* was a call for restraint and became the law to protect people from escalating revenge that was out of control. Jesus takes this mandate to oppose unlimited revenge yet another mile, by rejecting the principle of retaliatory violence as well.

Jesus’ *command to turn the cheek, to give the cloak, and to walk another mile* goes beyond passive resistance. These are positive actions that expose the smallness of the aggressor. These are loving acts of deviance that reflect one’s character. Rather than resisting the evil government or exerting energy on plotting how to get even, the disciple of Christ is called to go above and beyond what the law requires.

Concerning loving one’s enemies ...Jesus makes the command specific and concrete and takes the holiness code of leaving one’s harvest for the poor and the foreigner to another level in the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, not because of who they are but because of who we are and because of who God is!

The person who has given me insight into ‘going the second mile’ in resisting evil and loving one’s enemy is Nelson Mandela. As a religious person of Dutch descent I watched the apartheid in South Africa with fear and trembling.

In the book Playing the Enemy by John Carlin we get a glimpse into the character of Mandela, who was not particularly religious, yet who learned about reconciliation from the Methodists as a young boy. Mandela became a lawyer and leader within the African National Congress (ANC). In 1962 he was convicted of sabotage and sentenced to life in prison. Mandela served 27 years, mostly on Robben Island, where he was confined to a small cell and hard labor. The discipline, self-control and solitude of these years transformed Mandela. When later he was asked if he hated his jailers, Mandela replied “No! If I hated them, they would have won!”

Released from prison in 1990, Mandela was elected the first African president by the people in 1994. He was committed to a new era of reconciliation and respect, so when he learned that the African National Council, newly in power, voted unanimously to change the name, emblem and colors of the national rugby team, (which symbolized white supremacy to them and was cherished by the Dutch Afrikaners) he addressed the council personally and pleaded with them to change their mind.

Brothers, sister, comrades... I am here because I believe you have made a decision with insufficient information and foresight... When I was in prison at Robben Island, all my jailers were Afrikaners. For 27 years I studied them, I learned their language, read their books, their poetry. I had to know the enemy before I could prevail...and we did prevail. Our enemy is no longer the Afrikaner. They are our fellow Africans, they are our partners in democracy and they cherish the Springboks. If we take that away we lose them. We prove that we are what they feared we would be. We have to be better than that. We have to surprise them with compassion, restraint and generosity. I know all of the things they denied us but this is no time to celebrate petty revenge. This is the time to build our nation with every brick we have—even if that brick is wrapped in green and gold. (A scene from the movie Invictus)

The ANC went the second mile and rescinded their vote. The Springboks culminated their 1995 season winning the World Cup. South Africans of every color and political stripe, sang their national anthem with pride and shared in the victory dance, a victory almost as unexpected as the new life they were forging together in their country.

May we have the same courage in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. May we surprise others along the way in acts of compassion, restraint and generosity, going the second mile. Amen.