

Wesley United Methodist  
February 19, 2016  
Text: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18  
Matthew 5:38-48  
Title: Who are You? Go Beyond

Today's scripture readings are full of practical guidance about how to live. Some of it is relatively easy to hear but other parts of it are just downright difficult. What is the most difficult may vary for each of us.

Together, however, the scriptures give us an important message. We are not to live just like everyone else. We are to live with God's love as the guiding principle and that will affect how we live and how we relate to others.

Leviticus is essentially a book of laws, and this is the only time that it appears in the recommended readings of the Lectionary. Eugene Peterson, in "The Message" introduces the book of Leviticus by saying that "One of the stubbornly enduring habits of the human race is to insist on domesticating God. We are determined to tame God. We figure out ways to harness God to our projects. We try to reduce God to a size that conveniently fits our plans and ambitions and tastes."

He continues with the assertion that "Our Scriptures are even more stubborn in telling us that we can't do it. God cannot be fit into our plans, we must fit into God's. We can't use God – God is not a tool or appliance or credit card."

Referring specifically to the book of Leviticus, Peterson says, "The first thing that strikes us as we read Leviticus ... is that this holy God is actually present with us and virtually every detail of our lives is affected by the presence of this holy God; nothing in us, our relationships, or environment is left out." And it is true, that the book of Leviticus includes

words about just about anything you can think of including food, clothing, childbirth, infections, mold, marital relations and numerous other topics. It's all there.

The second thing about Leviticus is that it reminds us that God provides a way into God's holy presence so that we can stand in God's presence at every moment in our lives and that we are called to be holy, meaning living on God's terms, transforming all of life.

Peterson concludes by saying, "Once we realize this, the seemingly endless details and instructions of Leviticus become signposts of good news to us: God cares that much about the details of our lives, willing everything in and about us into the transformation that St. Peter later commended (in Romans 12):

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fit your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

(Romans 12:1-2 The Message)

That's what we've been talking about – our everyday ordinary life, our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life. Every part of our life is of importance to God and every decision we make, every action we take, is a reflection of our understanding of God and how God empowers us to live if we are open to God's ways. God is not just about 10 to 11 am

on Sunday mornings. God is about 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all 52 weeks of the year.

This becomes more evident in today's readings. Some of the Leviticus reading sounds familiar and it has a lot of parallels to Jesus' teaching today from Matthew's gospel. The last verse is something we have heard many times, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's part of what we call the Golden Rule and it was part of the summary Jesus gave when asked which law was most important.

But there is more to this passage. We have the early Hebrew version of food stamps. When you harvest your land, don't take all the crop, leave some behind for the poor and the alien so that they may also eat. This becomes a really big part of the story in the Bible of Ruth – the immigrant, and widow who became the great grandmother of King David and ancestor of Jesus. Ruth fed herself and her mother-in-law Naomi by picking up the leftover crops in the field of Boaz – a man who at the time did not know that they were related.

The leaving behind of some of the crop was understood to be a way of caring for God's children; it was a way in an agricultural society to make sure that everyone could find enough food to eat. Leviticus is concerned with both internal integrity and also outward behavior in daily life, "in home and field, in words to God and to each other, in neighborhood and courtroom."<sup>i</sup> Each of the actions identified includes the common concern of love for neighbor. How we love God is evident in every action we take. We are to be holy, because God is holy.

This doesn't mean some self-righteous piety. It doesn't mean thinking ourselves better than others and pointing out how good we are. Rather it

means that “Our behavior toward others witnesses, for good or ill, to the very character and nature of the God we worship and serve.”<sup>ii</sup>

When people watch us, do our actions recommend God to them, or do our actions say, “we aren’t any different than anyone else. We keep as much as we can for ourselves and we don’t care if others are hungry. We can be as nasty and mean as anyone else. When someone hurts us, we seek revenge and get even.”

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, recalls some of the laws that were familiar to his hearers. They may sound harsh to us today, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” By the way, that is found in Leviticus. It wasn’t meant to be carried out by someone for personal vengeance but it was designed for a court of law to put a limit to punishment and essentially to say that the punishment should fit the crime but not go beyond. However, Jesus uses this as an illustration to introduce a better way – one not based on revenge but one that transforms who we are. He gives three examples – sort of snapshots, to illustrate something greater.

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek – turn the other also.” This is not a passive acceptance of someone hurting you. There is a whole lot more than meets the eye. Generally, if a person were to strike someone on the right cheek – it would involve using the back side of the right hand to do the striking. It wasn’t only violence, it was also an insult – implying that you were inferior. This would be something a master might do to a slave or someone might do as an insult to show his superiority to the other. Offering the other cheek implies, that if you are going to hit me again, I will not let you do so in a way that says I am inferior. If you hit me again, you will have to do so as an equal, not as an inferior.

Similarly, in the court case, taking someone's coat would have left a person with only a lighter undergarment. Giving the second garment, would bring embarrassment and shame to the one who has taken from you. A Roman soldier had the right to force civilians to carry equipment for one mile but were forbidden from making someone carry things further. Jesus telling them to carry it a second mile, once again says, "I am in control of my life, you are not."

This is not about being passive and allowing someone to do what they will to you. It really has more to do with refusing to cooperate with the underlying paradigm of hate and brutality. It has to do with claiming who you are as a beloved child of God and refusing to cooperate with a system of evil-doing.

There is a tendency on our part to minimize these passages and to minimize how radical and difficult they were for those who heard them. We need to remember that the Bible was written by and for people who were under savage persecution. Think, what it would be like if while on your way to the market, a soldier could simply stop you and require you to carry his heavy equipment a mile in the opposite direction. Failure to do so, could mean instant death.

Carrying his equipment a second mile would be unheard of, and would no doubt confuse him completely. However, it might also start to get him thinking about his lack of control over you and wondering why you would do something like this.

This non-retaliating, seems at first like collaborating with them, but it is a profound resistance. It is an unexpected refusal to play the opponents adversarial game.<sup>iii</sup> It becomes a deeper level of defiance – refusing to be defined by someone else's actions.

Mohandas Gandhi has said that the Sermon on the Mount, and this section, specifically, influenced his non-violent strategy against the British colonial occupation in India. Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement, put this kind of behavior into action.

God's community is filled with people who think of others first. Every decision and action is carried out for the common good. Jesus, himself, embodied these actions. He refused to run away when arrested. He refused to back down from what he believed and he refused to be goaded into behavior that was not consistent with God's great love.

When we respond with hatred or violence, we allow ourselves to make more enemies and perpetuate the cycle of enemy making and violence. Rather than fighting fire with fire, we are better to fight fire with water and extinguish hatred enemy making and evil doing.

Jesus tells us that we should not only love our neighbor – most everyone does that – but that we should also love our enemy, and pray for those who persecute us. Rather than repay evil with evil, Jesus tells us to go beyond this and to refuse to fight evil with evil, refuse to seek revenge, but even in the midst of great difficulties to pray for those who are showing the most hatred. We may never know what our actions will mean to another.

“Nikolai Berdyaev, who abandoned Marx for Christianity, insists that neither history nor theology nor the church brought him to the Christian faith, but a simple woman called only Mother Maria. He was present at a concentration camp when the Nazis were murdering Jews in gas chambers. One distraught mother refused to part with her baby. When Maria saw that the officer was only interested in numbers, without a word

she pushed the mother aside and quickly took her place. This action revealed to Berdyaev the heart of Christianity.”<sup>iv</sup>

In a similar way, Viktor Frankl in his writing “Man’s Search for Meaning”, wrote, “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”<sup>v</sup>

The invitation and the call is to us. We can choose our attitude. We can choose to live as the world around us lives. We can choose revenge and hatred or we can choose love. We can choose to go beyond what is required of us and to live a life of fullness, by showing love, by living love in every situation and witnessing to God’s love. We can take our everyday, ordinary lives – our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. We can refuse to become so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without even thinking. Instead we can focus our attention on God and be changed from the inside out.”<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on The Word, Year A, Vol 1

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Illustrations Unlimited, Robert Hewett, editor, p.35

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, p.41

<sup>vi</sup> Adapted from Romans 12:1-2 The Message