

Leviticus 19:1-18

¹The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak 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. ³You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. ⁴Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God. ⁵When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the LORD, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable on your behalf. ⁶It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. ⁷If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. ⁸All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the LORD; and any such person shall be cut off from the people. ⁹When 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. ¹⁰You 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. ¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. ¹³You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. ¹⁵You 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You 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

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give 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.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

One Nation Under God

In the summer of the year 2000, the United States hosted the World Cup in soccer – or *football* as everyone but Americans refer to it. Rev. Samuel Candler went to RFK Stadium in Washington D.C. to watch the match between Mexico and Italy.ⁱ Now the colors of the Mexican flag and the colors of the Italian flag happen to be the same; red, white, and green. Everywhere he

looked he saw red, white, and green – people waving flags, people wearing the colors, some people even painting themselves red, white, and green. The stadium was filled with cheering fans enthusiastically shouting “Go Mexico” or “Go Italia.” The game ended in a tie, and the teams shook hands, exchanged embraces, even exchanged jerseys. After the game Rev. Candler and his friends went out to dinner where there happened to be a group of the Mexico fans celebrating. They began by shouting “Mexico, Mexico, Mexico...” but then they stood up, linked arms, and began chanting, “USA, USA, USA...” which got Rev. Candler thinking, reflecting on what a wonderful nation we live in, we can be proud of our heritage and proud to be an American as well. Many of us here celebrate our ancestry, enjoy our cuisine and culture, our language and art. But we can also be proud that we live in a nation where we *can* celebrate our ancestry and enjoy our cuisine and culture, our language and art openly and freely. But perhaps what’s more important is that we live in a nation where we can appreciate *other’s* heritage, culture, and ancestry as others can appreciate ours. The United States is perhaps the only nation on earth where so many people of so many cultures and nationalities and religions can live peacefully and in such close proximity to one another, because we are predominantly a nation of immigrants from all around the world, and, more importantly, we have over the centuries been striving to make this a nation where all people are welcomed.

It hasn’t been easy. Monday we “celebrated” President’s Day, though I wonder how many people besides school teachers and elementary school teacher actually thought about any Presidents. It’s not surprising because there’s no national consensus on which Presidents to recognize on President’s Day; for some it’s George Washington alone. For some it’s Washington as well as Abraham Lincoln. Alabama recognizes Washington and Jefferson on President’s Day perhaps because of the scars it still carries from the time of the Civil War. Yet most states agree that the two most important Presidents, the ones that are most often honored on President’s Day, were Washington and Lincoln. Both of these men led this nation during particularly challenging times in our history; Washington during the Revolutionary War and Lincoln during the Civil War. Among the challenges that both of these men faced was the challenge to unite people of different beliefs. Many people don’t realize how fragmented the American colonies were at the time of the American Revolution. The thirteen colonies were not all on the best of terms, particularly with regards to religion. Each of the colonies had their own religious laws based upon the company or individuals who chartered the colony, so South Carolina and Virginia were Anglican colonies – tithes collected in those colonies went to administering the Anglican Church, and in Virginia only Anglican men were allowed to vote. The Puritans and Pilgrims of Massachusetts on the other hand came to the New World fleeing the oppression of the Anglican Church, which they considered to be corrupted, and they prohibited the establishment of any Anglican Church in their colony. The strict laws of Massachusetts drove some folks to Rhode Island. Maryland, which was Roman Catholic, showed much more tolerance toward other beliefs than did most of the other colonies; in fact Maryland set up laws that made it a crime to speak of any other Christian sect in a derogatory manner, and yet it was a capital offense to deny either the Trinity or the divinity of Christ. New York was Dutch Reform and resented Quakers, who settled in southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania (I hope you appreciate the irony of this – all these religious sects seeking to escape religious persecution establishing colonies where those who didn’t follow their beliefs were persecuted). So even

though England became the common enemy to the people of the colonies, George Washington was still faced with a challenge of leading an army made up of all these denominations while keeping them from going at each others' throats. After the war and as President, George Washington signed into action the Bill of Rights, the First Amendment of which established religious freedom and separation of Church and State *throughout* the different states. No longer could you take taxes from a Quaker to support an Anglican church. No longer could you hang someone for not believing as you believed. Religious freedom helped to break down walls of prejudice that stood between people of different faith traditions. There were no doubt many who did not like this new religious freedom, people who thought that their belief was the only right belief and could not tolerate those who dissented, but looking back I think most of us are grateful that church and state are separate entities and that a Buddhist or Muslim or Jew or Hindi can enjoy the same rights and privileges as a Christian.

President Lincoln addressed and even more serious issue than George Washington in his endeavor to end slavery. Granted Abraham Lincoln was not an impassioned abolitionist, and the reason he initially gave for opposing the succession of southern states was to keep the union together, he nonetheless raised the war to a moral level by emancipating slaves. No longer would any person be the property of another person. This was not a very popular notion, particularly in the South where the economy had grown dependent upon slave labor. The notion wasn't very popular with many Northerners either – many a New Yorker wanted the city to be neutral and the slave trade to continue; congressmen from many northern states voted against the 13th Amendment. But Abraham Lincoln persisted in ensuring that slavery would no longer be tolerated in the United States. George Washington worked to advance religious liberty; Abraham Lincoln worked to advance basic *human* liberty, and though many a battle for civil rights has been waged since the time of Washington and Lincoln and many more battles are yet to be fought, we should appreciate how these two men led this nation with a vision of what we should be and could be as a people so that today most of us can hardly imagine how we could have ever been so intolerant and so ignorant and so evil. These men, and many men and women like them, had a passion for liberty and a vision of a nation where true justice prevailed, where people would be treated with equity.

Their passion and vision was nothing new. We can see that by simply looking at today's scripture passages. The passage from Leviticus admittedly includes some rather obscure commandments, but look at verses 9 and 10 – “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. 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.” These verses give us a glimpse of the community God is shaping, a community that is intentional in its care for the poor and the alien; God makes it Law to provide for the poor and the foreigner, and punctuates this Law with the simple declaration “I am the Lord your God.” Regarding the rights of the disabled, verse 14 states, “You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” Regarding human relations in general, verse 18 concludes, “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” And here the word that is translated “neighbor” is the Hebrew word רֵעִי (pronounced ‘ray-eh’) which means *another person*, not the

person who lives next door but *everyone you encounter on any day at any time*. So you see that the respective visions of Presidents Washington and Lincoln coincide with God's plan for those who desire to be his people. You shall reserve food for the poor and the foreigner. You shall care for those who are disabled. You shall love all others, and in so doing, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

Jesus holds us the same standard, saying, "Be perfect...as your Father in heaven is perfect." How can one be perfect? How can one be holy? *By loving others*, even those you consider your enemies. The first matter Jesus addresses in today's reading is the *lex talionis* or law of retribution ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). The *lex talionis* was a law that one might apply toward one's enemies, domestic or foreign, and it had the good intent of keeping people from excessive retaliation, of taking *two eyes for an eye, or ten teeth for a tooth*. It was designed to ensure equity and it did not distinguish between intentional or unintentional injury; whether you meant to bust someone's chops or not, if the fellow lost a few teeth, *you* would lose a few teeth as a result. Jesus now says *forget retaliation; consider re-education instead*. That's right; Jesus is not proposing retaliation, nor is he saying we should passively capitulate to those who would dare shame you; what Jesus proposes is that we *educate* those who would treat us inhumanely or unfairly. Don't submit to their cruelty, and don't "get even" with them for their misbehavior. Instead, *expose them to the shameful nature of their own behavior!* We have to recognize that, in Jesus' time and place, slapping someone on the cheek was not a form of punishment but rather the assertion of one's status or rank; a master would slap his slave on the right cheek with the palm of his right hand simply to assert that he is the master and the slave is a slave. The master, to maintain his honor, had to follow the prescribed slapping protocol – use the back of the right hand to strike the right cheek of the slave. Jesus, whose fan club consisted more of slaves than of masters, is telling his audience not merely to take the hit, which meant accepting one's status as slave, which is submitting to the status quo, but to "turn the other cheek" as if to welcome another slap, but keeping your head up and inviting a response from the one doing the slapping. With your left cheek now facing him, he must now strike you either with the left hand or with the *palm* of the right hand, either of which would be a breach in slapping protocol. The master is left with no good options and so is rendered powerless against the slave. Whatever the master decides to do, he is unable to repeat the customary slap that identifies him as "master."

Regarding a lawsuit to take a person's coat, well if someone is suing you for your coat you aint exactly rich; your coat and your cloak were generally your last two possessions on earth, and likely the person suing you was someone who in comparison to you was rather rich. Rendering the suitor your cloak as well as your coat rendered *you* completely naked and completely impoverished. Besides making the suitor look inhumane, it also placed an obligation upon him to return at least one article of your clothing by nightfall so as not to break the Law of Moses or cause you to suffer (Exodus 22:26-27). The person doing the taking now has to give back something or be in violation of the Law of Moses.

And as far as walking the extra mile, this again was a way of dignifying yourself to the oppressive Roman soldiers. It was Roman law that a soldier could require anyone at any time to

carry his rucksack for one mile. For a peasant, carrying a heavy pack for a mile could cost you your daily wages – time and energy spent carrying a rucksack took your time and energy away from the field you were working in. Going a second mile with a soldier is your choice, not your obligation, so now the person whose pack you’re carrying is your equal, not your superior – after that mile he no longer exercises any authority over you.

Regarding begging and borrowing Jesus now directs his words to the haves rather than the have-nots. Jesus is telling them to treat the beggar and borrower the way they would treat anyone in their own family, giving *more* than what is required by the Law. Refuse *no one* who wants to borrow from you, not even your enemies; in that sense you are treating that person like family.

What God is instructing us to do, what Jesus is instructing us to do, is to create a society where all people are treated not only fairly but compassionately, where we treat everyone with dignity and teach others to do the same – which is all part and parcel of loving others, even those we *call* our enemies. It’s a testimony to our achievements that those who some might consider foreigners or aliens can proudly chant “USA, USA, USA” while still cherishing their heritage and the land of their birth. Of course we have a long way to go in becoming the ideal community that Jesus envisions and advocates. And so again, the take-home for today involves some introspection into our own behavior. First of all, are there still people you consider to be your enemies? If so, *why* do you consider them enemies? If they’ve wronged you in some way, can you forgive them? Even more, can you *educate* them in a nonaggressive manner so that they may not do harm to others? Second, are you able to see yourself as equal to everyone else in God’s eyes? Equally loved? Equally free? Or are you still possessed by some demon that tells you that you are entitled to more than others? Finally, are you taking action to make this nation something we can all be proud of, a nation whose principles reflect the principles of found in scripture? We have all placed our hands over our hearts and pledged our allegiance to “one nation under God.” Like so many great leaders past and present, can we continue to advance the cause of human dignity and fraternity among all people of all nations so that those words “one nation under God” have profound meaning for us? We have a long way to go, and past experience has shown that change often comes at great cost, but I have confidence that as long as we truly seek God’s will for our country that we will continue to be a place of freedom and justice for all. May God grant us the vision and the courage to be a people of God, a nation under God. Let us pray:

Lord God, we come before you celebrating those great leaders, particularly those Presidents, whose vision corresponded with your will for humanity. We also humbly acknowledge that we, as individuals and as a nation, have often failed to embrace this vision out of selfish interests. Grant us your mercy and give us the faith and the courage to pursue your will and establish your kingdom in this world, a kingdom where people do not merely tolerate differences but celebrate them. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

ⁱ From a sermon titled “Independence Day,” found online at http://day1.org/674-independence_day