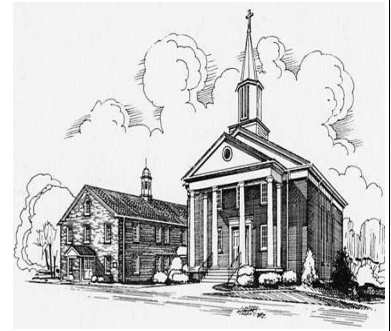


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Year A
RCL



Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18
Psalm 119:33-40
Matthew 5:38-48

The Collect

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18

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.

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.

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

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

LORD.

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. 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.

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

Psalm 119:33-40 Page 766, BCP

Legem pone

- 33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law;
I shall keep it with all my heart.
- 35 Make me go in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.
- 36 Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.
- 37 Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless;
give me life in your ways.
- 38 Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which you make to those who fear you.
- 39 Turn away the reproach which I dread,
because your judgments are good.
- 40 Behold, I long for your commandments;
in your righteousness preserve my life.

Matthew 5:38-48

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

“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, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and

sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

SERMON

I want us to think about human dignity this Sunday because our Gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount is about human dignity, although we're not accustomed to read it in that way. We've become so attached to the "turn the other cheek" pacifist reading of the passage that it is difficult to see beyond that to the radical nature of Jesus' teaching – that each of us represents a unique exercise of God's creativity and because of that, each of us is imbued with human dignity, a gift from God Himself.

You'd think that Christians, like Buddhists, would be moved to make a namaste each time we meet another to acknowledge God's handiwork but we don't, of course. We are unfocused on the central importance of human dignity. Generally speaking when we think of others we are much more accustomed to think in terms of the need for clothes or food and other necessities of life but human dignity and the need to be respected for your own worth is even more fundamen-

tal. A person robbed of human dignity withers and dies as surely as one deprived of food.

On January 6, 1941 President Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union speech, an address which is still known as the “*Four Freedoms Speech*”. President Roosevelt outlined four freedoms which, he said, should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. They were:

1. Freedom of speech
2. Freedom of worship
3. Freedom from want
4. Freedom from fear

Those are fine words, things we really believe in, and the concept which binds them together is the imperative to honor human dignity. A person stripped of his freedom to speak his mind has been denied his dignity. A person who cannot worship as his conscience dictates has been refused his human dignity. A person who hungers or fears that he may be cast out and left to die alone has been denied his human dignity.

Some years ago, the Kentucky State Police and I were

searching for a witness. We were way out in the boonies. The detective who was with me was familiar with the area and knew where the witness lived. He pulled the cruiser up at a wide place in the road and we got out. Ahead of us, up a hill, was a building which had clearly once been a chicken house. You will just have to take my word for it. I lack the ability to describe it otherwise. We began walking up the hill toward the house and the detective announced himself, "Kentucky State Police." There was no answer from the house. Through the window I could see something that looked like furniture, but nothing I would wish to sit upon. I noticed as we went around the side of the house that the Detective had drawn his pistol and was holding it slightly behind his leg. I did the same. It was eerily quiet.

We backed out, got in the cruiser and drove to a small convenience market about half a mile down. As we were talking to the clerk, our witness came down the road on a four-wheeler to meet us. He had been crouched in the house, hid-

ing from us.

You would not like our witness, had you met him. He smelled pretty bad. He was not living the good life. He was not upwardly mobile. As an American, he surely enjoyed freedom of speech and worship, but the same could not be said of freedom from want. For those who amuse themselves by imagining hoards of welfare Cadillac cheats living the good life on the public dole, welcome to my chicken house. There are such people, but the reality I have been describing is the more representative one. The ones living up the holler in chicken houses are there by adverse selection. Anyone in their community who had any skills has long ago left following the good jobs, leaving behind these, the remaindermen of estates long ago bankrupt, the unskilled, the addicted, the hopeless ones deprived of the last shred of human dignity, cowering in a chicken house.

Each of us who attended public schools could name these ones virtually from the first day of school. They are the ones

in the back who could not attend to what was being taught. The truants. The ones with an attitude who could not learn. We want to say that all are equal and that their failure to thrive was the result of their own laziness, but it is not true. No one aspires to live in a chicken house. One girl in my class had what we used to call a “reputation”. She was the butt of jokes all through her career. Decades later, she contacted me because of Kathy’s and my work with abused children and told me that she had been sexually abused by her father from an early age. She told me that she imagined that she could leave her body and walk through walls until it was over. To whom do you apply for your human dignity when your own father is treating you so and your classmates see you as the punchline of every joke?

When President Roosevelt included freedom from want alongside freedom of speech and worship, he was speaking directly from the heart of our Scripture today.

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.

Notice that there's nothing in that passage telling you to supervise who eats from your plenty. The commandment is for you to leave food in your fields for the poor and to let God do the judging. This is not just a suggestion from God. When God ends something with the words, "I am the LORD your God", you may be certain that He is serious about it.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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.

Even the ones you don't like represent God's handiwork and God's handiwork demands respect. That respect for God's handiwork ought to shape all economic policies, not just because it is the right thing to do but because failure to do so erodes the human dignity of all people. Pope Francis wrote last year, in his *Evangelii Gaudium*

The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.

The primacy of the human person! An economy lacking a truly human purpose! The primacy of God's handiwork has been displaced in our world by enormous herds of insensate corporations which methodically consume all before them leaving behind an empty wasteland dotted with God's abandoned children living in chicken houses. Worse yet, just as my classmates and I did to girl with the reputation, we stuff our ears full of judgment so that we cannot hear their cries.

This is only half the story. Leviticus tells us that we are obligated in the strongest possible terms to reach out to those who suffer from want and provide for their good, but what of those who suffer from fear? What of those who, by reason of their social standing, or their personal limitations, are power-

less and find their lives in the hands of others? In other words, what of those who are left to glean the fields for what they can find?

I said that Jesus' comments are frequently misunderstood, and that is so. Jesus taught:

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

He was not telling us that in the Kingdom we are to be doormats, willing victims of evil. Jesus is speaking here of the Christian duty to assert the incalculable worth of human dignity in all we do. You cannot disrespect God's child without disrespecting God.

To understand this teaching, we need to be reminded of conditions in Jesus' time and place. Jesus did not say (as we often understand it), "But if anyone strikes you, turn the other cheek." He said, "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" The only way a right-handed per-

son can hit another on the right cheek is to backhand him. That is the gesture of one who can strike without fear of retaliation — something one would do to a slave or another person who is powerless before you. Turning the other cheek says to that person, “I reject your attempt to diminish me. I, like you, am a child of God. If you would hit me, hit me as an equal.”

When Jesus talks of being sued for your coat, he’s not talking about courts as we think of them. He is talking about a system that further impoverished the poor who were often thrown into slavery when they could not pay their debts. Imagine a rich guy who has some poor slob in his tentacles and is dragging him off to court to get the guy’s coat. When they get there, the guy hands over the coat but also his cloak. This is a culture in which people wore only two garments and which had a deep aversion to public nudity. How does the rich guy look now, holding the poor man’s clothes while he stands shivering and naked in court? He is forced to confront

the consequence of his exercise of power over the poor man and the way his pursuit of profit has injured and dishonored God's child. To see the harm we do is to give us the opportunity to turn from it.

Roman soldiers were permitted to impress locals to carry their pack for a mile. Can you imagine the scene if, at the next mile marker the Jew should refuse to give it back to him and insist on carrying it another mile? Think of the powerful Roman soldier pleading with the Jew to give him his pack back. Such a thing strips the soldier of what he saw as his power to impress a burden onto a subject person, and instead grants to the Jew the power of choice! There is nothing here about being a doormat. What IS here is Jesus' teaching that the dignity given each human by his Creator, is to be honored in all we do.

Acknowledging that God's children are entitled to respect is one thing. Applying it in the real world, another. Our harsh humanity sees someone living in a chicken house and imag-

ines that they are there through some fault of their own. All of us know better, but we seem compelled by our harsh humanity to make a morality play from the suffering of others.

There have always been people who do not have the skills or ability to support themselves and there always will be. The dim, the damaged, the disabled, all are nonetheless God's children. They are among us. They live. Remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus? In our world, we are the rich man, and Lazarus lies outside OUR door. What does the teaching of Jesus tell us of our duty to such ones as this? You and all with whom you come into contact are children of God. You honor your Father when you honor His gift to His children of human dignity. Nemaste.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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