

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
February 20, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Love Your Enemy said Jesus

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13, Matthew 5:38–48

When I was 14, I was active in Boy Scouts and an usher in my home church. At that age, I also became a Christian and read the whole Bible through in a year. I remember how some of the scriptures like those read today reminded me of the Scout Law. The reading from Leviticus is part of what is called the Holiness Code. In a way, the Scout Law is a form of Holiness Code. “A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.”

This Godly or holy behavior is close to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, a form of the Holiness Code. However, in his sermon, Jesus took the Holiness Code “and intensified it, magnifying its spirit and faithfully cutting through to the very heart of the matter.” The heart of the matter was that we human beings are not always faithful in following God’s Holiness Code in our thoughts and behavior. As a 14 year-old I recognized this as my hormones raged in my primitive brain, ---my thoughts were not very holy toward the opposite sex, my anger would often get out of control, and once in while I cheated on my homework, which violated Scout Law, too. So, I was greatly troubled at 14 when I read Jesus’ command, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” I tried so hard to be perfect like God, but failed daily and was miserable within myself. I was far too imperfect to be a good Christian or Scout.

At the age of 22, God finally got through to me in my seminary classes on the Bible. There I learned several things: Jesus first loves us just as we are—this is grace, and then works on perfecting us. We cannot perfect ourselves: That the New Testament Greek word for “perfect” really means “to mature” which takes a life time to even get close to doing. I also learned that any perfection any of us reach in God’s eyes is only by what Jesus did for us on the cross. He saves us by grace. We cannot save ourselves. And, how we live our lives, whether we follow the Holiness Code and/or the Scout Law, is supposed to be a response of thanksgiving to this saving grace.

Keeping all this in mind, let us dare to examine and learn from Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. As the Scout Motto says, “Be Prepared.” In the Sermon on the Mount, “Jesus thought of the Mosaic laws as disciplines or steps toward the creation of a new society made up of new people. His proclamation of the kingdom of heaven did not destroy the Law, but fulfilled it.” Jesus began with the law of retaliation. Something I needed to learn about as a 14 year-old. Jesus led the listeners through “the stages through which the law of retaliation had passed, and how it finally came to rest in the universal love of the Father's own heart.” Theologian, Clarence Jordan writes, “There were four of these stages. The first method of dealing with one's enemies was that of *unlimited retaliation*. According to this principle, if somebody knocked out one of your eyes, you were justified in knocking out both of his, if you could get to him. If any enemy knocked out one of your teeth, you could knock out his whole set, if you were

able. There was no limit placed on revenge. It is the theory behind 'might makes right.' If one has the power to inflict more injury than he receives, he has the right to do so."

It became evident that the end result of this method would be mutual self-destruction. Therefore, a better way was sought, and the law of *limited retaliation* arose. This principle declared that if one harmed another, 'then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' According to this law, if one knocks out one of your eyes, you must not knock out *both* of his, just one. Or if it's a tooth, you must not retaliate by knocking out *all* of his teeth, just one. In other words, limit your retaliation to the exact amount of the injury. Get even, but no more. It's what many people have in mind when they speak of 'justice.' It is the most frequent basis of capital punishment.

Now, *limited retaliation* is a sight better than *unlimited retaliation*, especially if you're on the receiving end, but Jesus felt that kingdom citizens should go further yet. He said, "You've also heard the saying, 'Take an eye for an eye; take a tooth for a tooth.' But I'm telling you, *never* respond with evil. Instead, if somebody slaps you on your right cheek, offer him the other one too. And if anybody wants to drag you into court and take away your shirt, let him have your undershirt. If somebody makes you go a mile for him, go two miles. Give to him who asks of you, and don't turn your back on anyone who wants a loan" All this adds up to one thing: Let yourself be imposed upon."

"The third stage is that of *limited love*. This method is often prescribed in the Old Testament and is referred to by Jesus when he said, 'All of you have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' Some devout Jews then might have agreed with Jesus that if your neighbor, i.e., another Jew, knocked out your eye or tooth he might possibly be forgiven, but if he were an enemy, i.e., a Gentile, then he should be given the works. The idea was that there had to be *some* limit to this love and goodwill business, and the proper place to draw the line was with your own race. In this way a man could have two standards of righteousness: one in dealing with his kinsmen and another in dealing with strangers. This is what happens in a multicultural or multiracial society: *Limited love* becomes the bulwark of prejudice" towards people of different races, religions and nationalities in every nation. It's us versus them.

"To be sure, love, even though limited to one's own circle, is far superior to retaliation, whether *limited or unlimited*. But Jesus didn't feel that even this brought the law to its final goal, or fulfillment." Jesus taught *unlimited love*. "But I'm telling you, love the outsiders and pray for those who try to do you in, so that you might be sons and daughters of your spiritual Father: For he lets his sun rise on both sinners and saints, and he sends rain on both good people and bad. If you love only those who love you, what is your advantage? Don't even scalawags do that much? And if you speak to no one but your friends, how are you any different? Do not the non-Christians do as much? Now you all must be mature, as your spiritual Father is mature.' Here Jesus is simply saying that, for kingdom citizens, love must be the basis of all relationships and that it must be applied universally, both to one's race and nation and to those of other races and nations. There must be no double-dealing, no two-facedness, no partiality. Hate has the same effect upon the personality whether its object is friend or foe. *Unlimited love* shall not be halted at the artificial borders of race, religion or nation."

Some people rise up to say that this just isn't practical. It might be all right to turn the other cheek to a little baby enemy that can't hit very hard anyway, but it just won't work with a big, bad, grown-up enemy who might knock the daylight out of you. Force is the only language some people can understand, so you might as well be realistic about the matter. Suppose you try to be nice to everybody and give to those who ask of you, and lend to those who borrow and let the guy who takes the shirt off your back have your undershirt, too, and then they take advantage of you. With human nature being what it is, can you go in for this until everybody is willing to live that way?"

"Then there are people who say that this attitude is very practical and will work if given a chance. They believe that even in the cruelest person there's a tender spot which will respond to a continuous bombardment of love and goodwill. Citing many examples from history, they can present a strong case for the effectiveness of non-retaliation and active love. Many of them are willing to back up their belief in this idea with their lives, which within itself is a strong argument. The truth might be that in its initial stages *unlimited love* is very impractical. Folks who are determined enough to hold on to it usually wind up on a cross, like Jesus. Their goods get plundered and they get slandered. Persecution is their lot. Surely nobody would be inclined to call this practical. Yet, in its final stages, *unlimited love* seems to be the only thing that can possibly make any sense. Crucifixions have a way of being followed by resurrections. The end of love seems to be its beginning. Only he who is foolish enough to lose his life finds it. It's the grain of wheat which falls into the ground and *dies* that lives."

"But Jesus didn't tell his followers to love their enemies because love would or would not work. The idea probably never occurred to him to raise the question of whether or not it was practical. He told them that they should do it so 'that they might be sons and daughters of their spiritual Father.' It was quite evident from the sunshine and rain that the Father didn't limit his love to those who loved him and obeyed him, and it was to be expected that the son should partake of the Father's nature. This course of conduct would flow as naturally from them as it would from him. Being what he is, God can't help loving all people, regardless of what they are; even so, with God's sons and daughters. Their nature is not determined by the reaction of their enemies, but by their relationship to the Father. So in a way, Christians are at the complete mercy of their enemies, since by virtue of their complete surrender to the divine will they no longer have the freedom to cease being what they are. Bound by this higher loyalty, the argument of practicality is irrelevant to them. They do not for the sake of convenience set aside their nature, any more than a minnow transforms itself into a bird when in danger of being swallowed by a bass."

Of course, one does *not have* to be a son or daughter of God. It is purely a voluntary matter, though the choice is the difference between life and death. Yet if one does choose to become a son or daughter of God, then one of the conditions is that you "love the outsiders and pray for those who try to do you **in**." "Hate is a denial of being a child of the Father, who does not have it in his own nature, and never transmits it to his offspring. Or, if one confines his love to his own circle, he identifies himself not with God, who loves universally, but with the racketeers and pagans, who limit their love to those who love them."

“So Jesus lays upon kingdom citizens the obligation to be ‘mature, as your heavenly Father is mature.’” Again, the Greek word “perfect” translated means to have reached full maturity, a desired end or completion. “It is the word Jesus used on the cross when he cried, ‘It is finished.’ He didn't mean, ‘This is perfect,’ but that this was the completion of that phase of his ministry. It had come to its desired end.” Paul also uses the word “complete” in his chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.” Love, being whole, makes us complete. “Paul likens it to reaching maturity. Love is the adult stage. Without it, people ‘talk like a baby, think like a baby, act like a baby.’ Love is that which makes a person “outgrow childish things” and become mature. This is almost exactly what Jesus means when he says, ‘Now you, you all must be mature, as your spiritual Father is mature.’ To talk about *unlimited retaliation* is babyish; to speak of *limited retaliation* is childish; to advocate *limited love* is adolescent; to practice *unlimited love* is evidence of maturity. It is the Father's desire that his children become adults like himself. To be perfect, then, really means to quit acting like a child and to grow up. Is this an impossible command or an unreasonable request for Jesus to make of his followers?”

“But like those around Jesus who sought a definition of ‘neighbor’, some Christians have been seeking to justify themselves with the question, ‘And who is my enemy?’ Nor did Jesus explain just what he meant by love. And Christians are still wondering about it. They wonder if fighting might sometimes be an expression of love, if perhaps certain conditions must be set up prior to exercising love, if there's a personal responsibility when executing a state's orders. We just don't know all the answers. Even if we did, we couldn't be sure we had all the questions.”

“Until we know better, a safe guide for the Christian is to love all people with the love described by Paul” in today's Epistle Lesson, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Sermon on the Mount, revised edition by Clarence Jordan, pg. 63-71

All of this brings us back to where I began, the Scout law, especially where it says a Scout is brave, which means: “A Scout can face danger although he is afraid. He has the courage to stand for what he thinks is right even if others laugh at him or threaten him.” That is maturity. Are we brave or mature enough as Christians stand for what Jesus thinks is right by loving our enemies “even if others laugh at us or threaten us?” God will help us to be this brave.