

**Reflection for 22-23 February 2020**  
**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

***Mike Britton***

*Text: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; 1 John 2:5; Matthew 5:38-48.*

I want you to think back to a time when you were angry about something someone did. Not just a little bit angry, but really enraged, maybe imagining doing something violent in response. Maybe you even did something you later regretted.

Have you got it? Hold onto it for a minute. It might be uncomfortable; if so, that's a good sign.

For me, these times happen most often when I'm driving. I'm not sure what it is about it, but something about being behind the wheel leads me to forget my generally forgiving and conciliatory nature, and daydream of shooting out the tires of that pickup truck that completely unnecessarily cut me off on the Queensway.

(If that was you, I'm sorry.)

It's completely normal—healthy, even—to feel angry when we see wrong done; when we allow that anger to shift into a desire to harm, though, we already multiply the wrong, and multiply it still further if we act or speak—or drive—violently. My conscience tells me this whenever I slide into such thoughts, but changing my instinct comes hard. I'm working on it.

The law of “eye for eye and tooth for tooth”<sup>1</sup> was meant as a limitation on vengeance, a rule defining what was excessive. This was for a society where separation of church and state wasn't even imagined, and there was no dedicated police force. The people were their own enforcers of the law; the courts were a seldom-used last resort. The rule focuses on outward action, and doesn't look as God looks, on the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus recasts this law into the mold of the principle already set out in the first reading from Leviticus: “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge.”<sup>3</sup> He is saying new words, but they are an invitation to recognize and follow the deeper principle already present beyond the bare minimum required to allow the functioning of Jewish society.

In all of these precepts Jesus is trying to tell us how to live in light of the understanding that God loves all of us, and that we cannot fully receive that love until and unless we share it as God does—universally, with “the evil and the good,

... the righteous and the unrighteous.”<sup>4</sup> Paul tries to get the same idea across: “You”—all of you—“are the temple of God, and ... the Spirit of God dwells in you.”<sup>5</sup> Even in the ancient text of Leviticus, we find it hiding in plain sight: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”<sup>6</sup>

So what are we to do when we are wronged or see wrong done? I think the first thing we need to do is recognize our emotions—hurt, anger, and so forth—and decide not to be dominated by them. We can choose to see the humanity of each person, even those who perpetrate atrocities, and seek ways to help them do no more wrong. For any of us to learn love, we need to be shown it; only then can we begin to recognize, regret, and redress the consequences of the wrong we’ve done.

Pacifist resistance to evil is the answer Jesus teaches. Turning the other cheek, giving one’s cloak, or going the extra mile,<sup>7</sup> in the culture of the time, were means of shaming the oppressor. If you don’t think it works, ask Mahatma Gandhi, who applied this strategy to win free of an empire originally willing to exploit and even kill the citizens of a nation for their own enrichment.

Jesus’ own Passion, of course, is the great prototype of teaching love this way. He doesn’t resist, even though he is taunted, “[S]ave yourself! If you are God’s son, come down from the cross!”<sup>8</sup> Instead of a display of power and revenge, his answer is “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>9</sup>

I think we sometimes draw too great a gulf between Jesus and ourselves. He invites us to step up and not be satisfied with half-measures, telling us to “be perfect, just as [our] heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>10</sup> Even though we stumble, he simply calls us each and every time to “go and not sin any more.”<sup>11</sup> Whenever we live the essence of the commandments, even for a moment, we are what we are meant to be: the Father’s holy temple, the living body of the eternal Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit. We receive and give God’s unifying and perfect love.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 21:24

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:45

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 19:2

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:39-41

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 27:40

<sup>9</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:48

<sup>11</sup> John 8:11