

3rd bef Lent, 2011
Twente, Nijmegen

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Cor 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

The Holy Calling of Defiant Love

I usually give sermons titles, mostly for my own use. The titles try to capture the main point I have discovered in reflecting on the Biblical texts set for that day. Today, the following title struck me: ‘The Holy Calling of Defiant Love.’

The ‘holy calling’ bit may have become fairly obvious as we’ve worked our way through the challenging passages from the Sermon on the Mount the last few Sundays. When we hear Jesus’ bold and demanding words, we are left in no doubt how high the standards of his Kingdom are, and that as his followers we are called to be light and salt – being different and dynamic in a world so in need of faith, hope and love.

So the holy calling bit may now seem obvious, even if we sometimes shrink back from the demands of holiness. But just because we may find holiness intimidating, that does not mean that we should not have it as a goal.

We say, virtually every Sunday, as our fellow Christians have done for over 1500 years, a creed that states that ‘We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.’ In other words, we believe in Christian unity, we believe in Christian diversity, and we believe in Christian mission: speaking out about the love of God in a needy world. But we also profess that we believe that we Christians are called to be different, set apart, holy.

But that last mark of the Church – holiness – runs against our tendency to want to go with the flow, to fit in, to not offend anyone. But Jesus said, ‘If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.’ (Matt 5:13^b)

We are meant to be the salt of the earth, bringing flavor to society, but also challenging it, cleansing it, tenderizing it. To be salt may not always

be easy or popular. But then, whatever is easy or popular is not always good or right, is it?

Jesus set high standards. Had he not, we may have never heard of his teachings. But because his standards are Godly, the Sermon on the Mount has remained one of the most famous and challenging manifestos ever on how to live.

Neither what we heard from Leviticus today nor Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount can be dismissed. They are not about finger-wagging scolding or impossible aspirations.

They are straightforward guidelines about how to live in relationship with others. The standards are not low. If they were, they would be worth less to us, and would have far less transformative power. The biggest problem with Christian ethics is NOT that the principles don’t work, but that they are not tried out often enough!

St Francis once said, ‘Sanctify yourself and you will sanctify society!’ And he did.

Sometime later, the great Scottish Presbyterian minister and social reformer Thomas Chalmers said, ‘The beauty of holiness has done more to regenerate the world and bring in everlasting righteousness than all other agencies put together.’ Aiming high matters; it changes things.

Think of Corrie ten Boom, who later forgave her guards in the Nazi prison camp of Ravensbruck. Think of the character in the film *The Shawshank Redemption*. He was falsely imprisoned for murder, but kept his humanity and his hope, and so became an inspiration to his fellow prisoners, and eventually subverted the injustice of the system. Think of MLK, who refused resort to violence, and so changed the US.

When Jesus says, ‘Not “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” – which was, after all, an improvement on the ancient practice of blood revenge, of disproportionate retaliation – he proposed instead to ‘Turn the other cheek.’ He was not advising something impossible or irrational, but practical.

He was counseling us to learn to redirect hatred, to disarm it. Rather than retaliating, which does no one any good, he tells us to put aside our hurt pride, and seek the higher way. Resisting revenge may seem painful at first – it is hard to keep a lid on our emotions when they are boiling over. But if we do not strike back, we can have greater satisfaction knowing that God’s grace and love can overcome even our own anger. And if we allow God to master our anger, then that shows others that their anger is useless, too.

Jesus is not saying holiness and the loving way is about being a doormat, allowing people to walk all over us continuously. That would NOT be what Jesus wanted of the salt of the earth, which was not supposed to be tasteless and trampled upon.

Turning the other cheek is a defiant challenge. The person who struck you will then need to use their less dominant hand. Or use the back of their hand. Either way, this act is intended to make the abuser think. Think again. To reflect on injury, the misuse of power, and the ultimate futility of violence.

To give your shirt when someone has taken your coat would leave you fairly naked, which should bring some sense of shame to the person taking it.

The whole point that Jesus is making is that we can learn to wrong-foot our opponents with radical and shocking patience and generosity. This is costly, not conditional. But it can change a situation, and, by extension, the world.

The idea that the sun rises on the evil and good alike, or that the rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous, shows us just how remarkably indiscriminate is God’s amazing love.

Are we challenged by the notion that people we don’t like much are equally loved by God? We should be.

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour 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.’

Jesus’ standards seem impossible, but are only impossible if we remain untouched by God’s love. Love my enemy? Don’t take revenge? Go the extra mile? Impossible! Until we are open to letting God live in us and through us. Open to admitting we cannot manage on our own. Open to accepting God’s help, to heal us and to renew us and our relationships.

Then we see that all those self-interested calculations actually get us and everyone else nowhere. But if we truly want a better world, such things are possible, with God.

CS Lewis wrote, ‘The goal towards which God is beginning to guide you is absolute perfection; and no power in the universe, except you yourself, can prevent Him from taking you to that goal.’ The way to holiness begins with humility, but it continues as our hunger for God’s righteousness grows. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Amen.