

**“Jesus the Radical”** by Tim Hall, 19 February 2017, 7 Epiphany Year A

Jesus was a radical. Not a liberal or conservative. Certainly not a Democrat or Republican. But a radical, for sure. There’s no two ways around it. Even if we have trouble accepting the Jesus miracles that are documented in the Bible... the Virgin birth, the descent of the dove and God’s blessing from above at his baptism in the Jordan River, changing water into wine at Cana, healing the sick and the lame, walking on water, calming the storm, bathed in fire and light with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of the Transfiguration, raising Lazarus and others from the dead; yes even all these and more, there’s no denying that Jesus preached a gospel of revolution, a gospel filled with ideas that were so different from the norms of the day, and lived out in his life, that they changed people’s hearts... then and now. Jesus’s radical teaching challenged authority, challenged accepted values, challenged injustice, and changed the world.

For most of Epiphany we’ve been with Jesus on the mountainside, listening to his “Sermon on the Mount” as it is so famously called. It’s a manifesto of radical change. It begins with “The Beatitudes”, the many ways that we are blessed if we humble ourselves, seeking righteousness and loving mercy. And then we are told to be the salt of the earth, a light to the world. Let our goodness shine. Let our lives be lived for others. And this morning Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to not seek an eye for an eye.

A bit of historical context... First, consider the eye-for-an-eye rule of the Hebrew Bible. That was a good law. In the Ancient Near East, a common way to settle perceived injustices was unmitigated vengeance (you injure my brother's eye and I and my brothers will take out both of yours—maybe even kill you). So the Mosaic law of an eye-for-an-eye was meant to mitigate that instinct for unbridled retaliation. Moreover, Jewish legal procedure soon developed the practice of substituting financial recompense as the appropriate response to claims of personal injury—much like our practice today in the Western world.

As reasonable as that approach was, Jesus called for an even further advance against the human zest for “getting even”. Note that Jesus says, “if someone strikes you on your *right* cheek, turn the other also.” In a mainly right-handed world, a slap across the right cheek is back-handed, and in first-century Palestine a back-handed slap was meant not so much to inflict physical injury as to dishonor the person slapped. If someone dishonored you with the demeaning back-handed slap, you were expected to reclaim your honor by responding in kind. Thus, Jesus' suggestion to turn the other cheek would, in that context, be a surprising move, indicating that you simply refuse to be dishonored so easily.

The second example presents a similar ploy. The situation of someone taking someone else to court over a tunic is one of extreme oppression. After all, Exodus 22:26-27 commands: “If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset, for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body.” So the oppressor is asking for something that violates the rights of the other. When Jesus suggests handing over the cloak as well, he is saying, in effect, “When you hand over your other garment, your nakedness will expose not only your flesh but also the extent of your adversary's oppression.”

Similarly, the example of “going the extra mile” also draws from a specific social context. The usual way for Jesus' contemporaries to be “pressed into service” was when they were enlisted by one of the occupying Roman soldiers to carry his backpack for him. This

situation was a constant source of hostility between the occupying forces and the local people. One could paraphrase Jesus' example this way: "Does that bug you when the Roman soldiers make you carry their baggage? Well, let me suggest an alternative to the hostile response you may be tempted to give: Carry it not just for the one mile but for two. That way, the Roman will get into trouble with his superior officer. He'd be exceeding his own Roman law, which allows him to press you into service for only one mile."

So, these sayings of Jesus are not new rules, but examples of nonviolent response to oppression. Rather than actions to be imitated literally, they were examples meant to stimulate similar forms of creative nonviolence. These teachings of Jesus inspired Mahatma Gandhi to his famous salt march, exposing the oppression of the British salt tariff on India. Closer to our own time and place, these teachings of Jesus led Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to his creative nonviolent practices of bus boycotts, restaurant sit-ins, and peaceful demonstrations and marches.

These same challenges and the need to change the world continue today. We see it all around us... injustice seems to be the norm of the day... people suffering at the hands of tyrants, families fleeing wars and genocide, children dying of starvation, ... even while so many live in safety and opulence. What are we, as followers of Jesus, called to do? Our readings this morning give us the bookends we need to hold us upright in this journey.

First, from the Old Testament, we are told to "Be holy, for I the Lord your God is holy". And then Jesus closes our readings telling us to "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect". WOW!! These are some challenging directions. What does it mean to be "holy?" What does it mean to be "perfect?" And, how can we ever apply these terms to ourselves? I know *my* weaknesses. I know *my* inner thoughts. I am aware of my private behaviors that would be embarrassing if made public. As the Psalmist says, my sin is always before me, even though no one else may notice it. Yet, this Sunday's scriptures challenge us to be both holy and perfect.

Fifty years ago, President Johnson launched what he called "the great society," providing a social safety net, intending to uplift vulnerable Americans of all ages. Leviticus 19 is pure politics. It is about what it takes to be a great society. Moses, the religious and political leader, challenges the people to be holy and then gives them a list of what constitutes holiness in the body politic – a social safety net mandated for the poor, honesty (regulations) in business dealings, fair labor practices, truth in advertising, and respect for the vulnerable. Relationships were at the heart of the politics of Leviticus 19. Holiness pertained to the inner life, personal behavior, and the legal-governmental system.

It has been said, "you can't legislate morality," but that is precisely what Leviticus 19 does. Behaviors are guided by laws that benefit the whole community. Laws influence behaviors which over time influence character and attitudes. A community is harmed if there is poverty and dishonesty in business and if the poor are left behind while the wealthy flourish. Today, we might expand community holiness to include the ecosystems and the non-human world. Holiness invites us to be stewards of the earth and not just consumers.

Leviticus doesn't give us a definition of holiness, but it does show us what it looks like. The holiness of Israel will set it apart from other nations. Today, some people speak of "American exceptionalism" and I am all for that, provided it means being exceptional in morality, in the conduct of a robust and wise foreign policy, in caring for the poor of our nation

and the world, and in respect for the non-human world, leading by political and economic example toward a sustainable and green economic order.

In contrast to Leviticus, which is political in nature and pertains to an emerging nation, Jesus' words that call us to be "perfect as God is perfect." are addressed to a small and powerless community, in which it is easy to give up hope and want revenge. Jesus proclaims that God is present in the lives of the oppressor and enemy, and that, although we are politically powerless, our love can be transformative. Still, the guidance Jesus' words provides to individuals can shape our individual involvement in transforming the social order.

To be perfect is to love in the way God loves, to practice the way of compassion and giving as God has demonstrated it to us in Jesus. Because this perfection has to do with love, which is self-giving, it is geared toward the other, and has little to do with our concepts of perfection. In fact, "the root meaning of the word 'perfect' is undivided, whole, complete.

The perfect life might just be seen as the life of love for God, for self, and for others (which of course, are the two gospel commandments) that takes us out of our nervous self-concern into relationships within community. Following the teaching of Jesus, then, leads to wholeness and completeness in all aspects of life and in all people not by focusing on the self but on my living and loving the other.

A few years before Johnson's Great Society, Martin Luther King spoke of the "beloved community," where justice, compassion, and equality were the norm; in which people realize that their destinies were intertwined and that our well-being depended on others' successes. This is what Paul is telling us in our reading from Corinthians this morning... We, together as Christ's body, are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in us. Do not be drawn apart by human leaders whose wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. Remember that it is in togetherness that all things are ours, and together we belong to Christ ... and Christ belongs to God.

As we gather together for our Congregational Meeting after this service, let us remember these lessons as we examine where God is calling us to serve as a community. I pray that God will grant us the grace and wisdom to be holy and perfect as we discern how to be radically just, radically inclusive, radically generous, radically welcoming, radically forgiving, and radically loving, all through the power of God's Spirit dwelling in us.

Amen.

*~ Tim Hall, 19 February 2017, 7 Epiphany Year A*

*With input from three different reflections by Dennis Hamm SI; The Reverend Mark J. Suriano, Pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Park Ridge, New Jersey; and Bruce G. Epperly, Pastor and Teacher at South Congregational Church, Centerville, MA*