

# Choose to Love

## Or How to Build the Blessed Community

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

7th Sunday after the Epiphany  
Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18, Matthew 5:38-48  
February 19, 2017

This is an honest question. How many times have we heard a Christian, a follower of Christ, a disciple of Jesus say "an eye for an eye"? A lot, right? These are among the least surprising words to come out of his mouth or the mouths of any of his people. But...how many times have you heard it said from such a one "do not resist an evildoer?"

How many? Any?

Jesus has been challenging us for weeks now with this Sermon on the Mount. He's been teaching us the way of God's statutes. He's been showing us what responding to the pain of the world looks like. This season of new beginnings, still early in our year, and Jesus is teaching us how to live as children of God. The Shalom-makers. The lovers.

He's been showing us how reconsidering all we know is necessary to moving forward, to growing and seeking God in one another. He uses this sentence construction: "you have heard it said...but I say to you" not to negate, but to reveal and fulfill. To turn over what is stale and rote and taken for granted so we can see it with new eyes.

"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."

If these words don't challenge you, then you're not listening. If they don't get you where you're at. Republican or Democrat. Man or Woman. Gay or Straight. If they don't challenge everything you believe about dealing with each other, then you aren't hearing it.

But let's back up a hair. I want us to dig into Leviticus first.

### To Fulfill Torah

Remember two weeks ago, Jesus was reminding his people that he came not to abolish the Torah but to fulfill it.

And few parts of Torah are more exciting and confusing and challenging than the middle of Leviticus. Now Leviticus gets a bad rap because it's hard to wade through and just when it starts to liven up it puts you through the emotional ringer. And we don't know how to receive it today. Either as followers of Jesus or as 21st Century North Americans.

So right in the middle of the most challenging part of a book devoted to helping the blessed community build something out of nothing, a community out of individualism, a sense of common cause in a world of tribalism and fractured relationships, God says to Moses *Tell them*

"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

A promise of holiness, not because they deserve it, but because this is the nature of the kind of community they are building.

He does it because we are to be like God: people who do this.

He reminds them that the land isn't theirs as individuals; it's God's given to all the peoples, so make sure everybody gets fed off it.

Don't defraud, lie, cheat, steal, hold back wages, judge, slander, profit off the life of your neighbor! Don't hate in your heart or seek revenge, but love. Love your neighbor as yourself.

This is the bedrock of community. And they needed to be reminded of it over and over again. Just like we do. As much as we claim some respect for the Ten Commandments, for Torah, this is its backbone. And the way the people can build the blessed community.

Through active love. The antithesis and destroyer of hatred and violence and oppression.

And we only know love when we learn to share. Because this isn't mine or yours. It's God's. And God promised all have the right to eat from the field. Even the field you or I till.

### **So Now Back to Jesus**

So when Jesus is talking about fulfilling Torah he's talking about this. The backbone of and the means of building the blessed community, what he keeps calling the Kin-dom of God. Like some upside down and transformed world from what we know.

And he can only get there because we all know, and all have known for the past 2000 years what earthly kingdoms are like. That God wants us to flip our priorities like those tables in the Temple. Flip our economy and our beliefs and our cultural expectations upside down. So we can see how off they are. How far from the blessed community we are.

So he gives these examples of what to do when confronted, and many of you have heard these three and how we've domesticated them.

*Turn the other cheek, sweetheart. You'll get over it!*

*Everybody! I need you to go the extra mile and offer the best service possible!*

Anytime I hear these now I want to scream.

Because Jesus's script flipping is not so lame as that.

Turning the other cheek is about standing up to evil and forcing them to treat you like a human being.

Going the extra mile is a life-threatening proposition...for the Roman soldier who is only allowed to make you go one mile, not two.

And the one that gets lost in the middle, the one where you are standing in the courtroom because your friend is trying to take your coat from you, which is a direct violation of Torah to not let anyone go without a coat,

and he's trying to take that from you by law in front God and all your neighbors who you love like yourself? There's only one response to that.

You reveal to the world what he's doing to you. You take off the rest.

### **No Resistance**

This is the problem with us. Humans, that is. We can't get this. We can't get the order to love and not cheat others out of love. Out of the love of God. Metaphorically and experientially of course. But also literally. As in the right to food and a coat to sleep in at night.

That the land and its bounty is God's not ours and we are blessed to share in it.

So when we hear Jesus say not to resist the evildoer, we forget:

This is a commandment for **us**. Not how **we** measure *other people*.

It's how the Civil Right pioneers had the strength to face the good Christians in Alabama who were enforcing God's law upon them.

Just as their ancestors did a century earlier, resisting those who insisted *they* possessed a God-given right to oppress and own another human being's body. And why they only saw them as bodies, not human beings because then those people'd need to be free. They forgot all of this is God's, so we don't own it and we are blessed to share it.

I don't get to judge how well you turn your cheek, but by God, I get to judge myself. I don't get to stoop to that. And I don't get to run away either. I get to stand up in the face of God and make my choice.

This is not the end. Of me. Or of this fantastic gospel of love.

This is not the end of this blessed community, this ragtag bunch of shalom-makers we've got right here!

These people standing up! For love and community. For caring for each other and our neighbors by the river. The ones who only have a coat. Until someone tries to steal that from them.

And what do we do then?

We stand. And we keep standing. Until everybody has a coat. Everybody gets a home. Everybody gets fed. And then we will be living in a beautiful and truly blessed community.