

Sermon Epiphany VII Year A 2011
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48
Psalm 119:33-40
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I enjoy travel and particularly the perspective it creates. I am always struck by how my perspective changes depending upon the direction I am traveling. The road has a certain feel, appearance and perspective as I drive in one direction. That perspective changes when I turn around and head home again. My perspective is impacted by the vistas along the way but also the cumulative experience of the feelings of prior trips on the same route. All come together to create a feeling about the trip and how I experience it. The same road but experienced from different perspectives.

Your perspective on the same road will be different than mine depending upon your experience. Not everyone views a situation in the same way.

I learned that most poignantly during my summer studying in Africa. On the first day in Nairobi, my field assistant, Alex, took me on a walking tour that began in Uhuru Park (which means freedom). As we turned a corner there sat a man on a stool with a camera around his neck. A box was in front of him with photographs clipped to the box. My field assistant whispered in my ear, "Look, he is shaming those people." "What?" I asked? I did not understand what he was saying. I had looked upon this scene from my western perspective and thought I was seeing a photographer who was displaying examples of his work as a marketing tool. The reality was entirely different. In East Africa, pictures are very personal and private. To have one's picture displayed is

similar to our displays in the Post Office. These people had ordered pictures and had not returned and paid for them. So by displaying their pictures they were being shamed. The only solution was to come and pay for their picture.

This helps explain something about photography in Africa. I had been told to never carry my camera in view. I had assumed that was just because it might be stolen. But the reason was more complex. Unlike in the States, in East Africa, people do not take pictures without permission from their subjects.

Our gospel lesson again comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The season of Epiphany is particularly long this year since Easter comes so late in the calendar. This is the seventh Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The assemblers of the lectionary have seemingly hidden these "difficult teachings" of Jesus late in Epiphany. Most years when Lent and Easter occur earlier, we don't get to explore these difficult teachings.

As always, Jesus presents his teaching in the context of the worldview of the Middle East, specifically the Hebrew community in his day. The environment in which he worked is key to understanding his teaching. That culture was defined by concepts of shame and honor. One worked to be worthy of and held in honor. One did that to avoid the deep taint of shame. In such a culture to be shamed is deeply humiliating and individuals and families act to avoid shame. That is important if we are to understand our lessons.

Jesus begins, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" "But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." What is Jesus saying here? From our western perspective, we may believe that Jesus is encouraging a non-violent stance in the face of physical injury. Well, we must know something of

the context. His response is more nuanced than we might have thought.

Notice the detail of which cheek was struck first?

Theologian Walter Wink has offered this explanation. To be struck on the right cheek meant that you were slapped backhanded. This was a shaming act of dishonor; an insult from someone of higher social status. Jesus encourages his listeners to then turn the other cheek, presenting the left cheek to be struck by the fist. To hit someone with a fist is to acknowledge the other person as an equal rather than an inferior. Thus turning the other cheek takes away the other's ability to humiliate and dehumanize. In his teaching, Jesus is actually upholding the dignity of every person.

Jesus continues, "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." To the western ear this sounds like adding insult to injury. It sounds like allowing another to walk over us. But again we must understand the cultural setting to fully comprehend the teaching. Theologians say the teaching is more complicated. Jewish men wore two garments, a linen one next to the skin and a heavier one outside for warmth. The story envisions a person being sued to pay a debt and in the suit is asking for the inner garment. Jesus says in that case give the outer garment or cloak as well. This would have left the person naked. To look on the nakedness of another was shameful and in standing naked, paradoxically, the creditor in looking upon the naked man would have brought dishonor and shame on himself. (from *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* by Walter Wink)

When we take into account the context in which Jesus lived and taught, the responses take on new perspectives. When we read Jesus' teaching from a

western perspective if we are not careful we can make Jesus sound naïve. In actuality, the responses have layers of meaning when viewed from the perspective of his day and culture.

We hear of events and actions in other parts of the world and we have difficulty making sense of them from the lens of our cultural perspective. To this day we may have difficulty understanding the actions of people in the Middle East which is still heavily influenced by a culture of shame and honor. Why would people act in that way, we wonder?

Only when we manage to move outside our cultural perspective can we hope to view a situation through another lens. What underlies Jesus' teaching is the profound dignity of every human being. This is the theme that runs through our readings today.

In our lesson from Leviticus, the Lord speaks through Moses saying to the people of Israel, "You shall be holy." To be holy is to follow the commandments of God and to love our neighbor. In loving God and neighbor, in seeing each and every person as infused with the sacred image of the divine, we live into our calling to be holy.

That sacred perspective on all human life continues in our Epistle lesson. Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?" "God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

There is no one correct cultural perspective. Regardless of our context or our perspective though, scripture calls us to holiness, to an ever more faithful life following the commandments of God.

Sometimes we must leave our familiar environment in order to experience the gospel with new insight. We call this experience mission.

Mission is a complex process, with many perspectives and opportunities. There is the opportunity to be a missionary and spread the gospel by sharing the good news. But scripture calls us to other mission imperatives as well. Following Matt. 25 we feed the hungry, house the homeless and cloth the naked. And as if that were not enough there is more to mission. Mission is not just about building housing or feeding the hungry as important as those ministries are. If it was only about the building, we could simply send our money rather than ourselves. But in mission we send ourselves. Whether that mission is down the street or in faraway places such as Central America. Mission takes us on a journey of encounter and of relationship.

(Connect to the Epistle, and the picture on my desk from the German mystic, Meister Eckhart. “the eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me.” It is coming to see the divine, sacred image in each and every person we encounter. We dare not devalue any other human being, because they are God’s creation, as are we. We are created in God’s image with the unique hopes that God has for us in our life of service and mission.)

Mission brings us into contact and relationship as we encounter people in their cultural setting. Such mission allows us to experience the world through a different lens. It is to open ourselves to the possibility of transformation, to the possibility that this encounter, this experience may reveal something new about God.

St. John's has a strong history of mission. Mission here in this community and mission in the wider world. All mission is important and none is trivial. All mission brings us into relationship with others and with God. Over the coming months many opportunities are occurring here at St. John’s

for you to involve yourself in the mission of God. I hope you will be able to take advantage of them.

Our gospel lesson concludes with Jesus' high hopes for us. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now perfect in this sense is not what we might think of as perfection. Rather Jesus is calling us to a life of holiness. A life following the commandments of God, of loving God and our neighbor and of coming to see the image of God in each person we encounter.

This is the common thread through our lessons this morning. Each of us is called to a holy life. Called to a life of relationship with one another where we come to see the divine image in each other. Called outside ourselves into relationship with folks from myriad backgrounds and perspectives. Each one of them holy and bearing the very image of God.

One of my favorite memories of Bishop Frank Vest, your former interim rector, comes from a fall youth retreat. The theme of the weekend was "created in the image of God". The weekend featured a T-shirt that espoused the dignity of every human being. The T-shirt was imprinted with the grammatically incorrect logo, "God don't make no junk". As the weekend concluded Bishop Vest was presented with one of the T-shirts, which he promptly put on.

The perfect life that Jesus calls us into is one in relationship with people as different as we can imagine. Yet, despite those differences we can also discover the divine thread that weaves itself through each and every person. Each of us is called to be holy, to be the very temple of God. You see, God don't make no junk.