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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, February 19, 2017  
 Text: Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18

## Love Your Neighbor

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Our first reading comes from a portion of the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. Listen carefully and you will hear nine of the Ten Commandments imbedded in this passage, along with other ethical decrees.<sup>1</sup> Listen for God's word: *Leviticus 19:9-18*.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Matthew in a section where Jesus is repeatedly questioned by his adversaries who are hoping to trip him up. Listen again for God's word: *Matthew 22:34-40*.

### *Sermon*

Many moons ago Jack and I attended a marriage retreat with our Presbyterian church from Atlanta. I don't remember much advice from our retreat leader about cultivating marital bliss. But I do remember the signs. We stayed at a Baptist camp in North Georgia. At every turn was a sign prohibiting something: By the lake: No Fishing. No Swimming. No Boating. Across the grounds: No Parking. No Smoking. Do Not Walk on the Grass. In the dining hall: Do Not Leave Trays on the Tables. In the guest rooms: Do Not Make Noise after 10 p.m. This place specialized in You Shall Nots. All those Negative Nancy signs made us Presbyterians want to run across the yard at midnight and go skinny dipping with our boom box blaring Three Dog Night's "Mama Told Me Not to Come."

To be fair to the Baptists, though, there is ample biblical precedent for You Shall Not. We heard quite a few of them just now from Leviticus 19. By my rough count there are about a hundred You Shall Nots in Leviticus alone plus another almost five hundred You Shalls. God, through his press secretary Moses, did not mince words when he laid down the law. And Leviticus is, after all, the central book of the Law or the Pentateuch, the first five Jewish books of the Hebrew Bible, also called the Torah.

But, thanks to Jesus and St. Paul, Christians don't have to put up with all that law, right? Law is the opposite of grace. And since grace is good, law must be bad. Well, no, that's actually a distortion of New Testament theology, but that's a sermon for another day.

The Law is not bad. On the contrary, it's a good thing, a very good thing. God gave Israel the law for the best possible life in community. It provided stability and wellbeing for all, including the disadvantaged. It provided structure so that all could flourish. Anyone who has ever raised a young child knows that structure is essential if you don't want to live in chaos. The same goes for grown-ups. (Bed times and rules against hitting are still really helpful.) The pinnacle of the Law which God gave Israel was, of course, the Ten Commandments. While Western civilization is founded on this bedrock, it occurred to me that we seldom ever hear the Ten Commandments in church. Not so in yesteryear. In John Calvin's churches, the congregation sang them every Sunday.

If we want our life together to function well, we do need reminding of God's vision for us. We need to hear the You Shall Nots and You Shalls and in gratitude obey them, if for no other reason than self-interest. After delivering the Ten Commandments to Israel Moses said it behooved the people to live by them. "You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess."<sup>ii</sup> The law was a life-giving gift which the people could ignore at their own peril.

Let's turn now to the content of a portion of the Law we heard this morning in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. Like the Ten Commandments, the first several verses Harry/Bruce read begin with commandments relating to God: no idols or graven images; keep God's Sabbaths. But then, also like the Ten Commandments, the text turns to commandments relating to others. This emphasis on social ethics is where we will focus.

The commands begin with instructions about gleaning. The people are not to reap to the edges of their fields or harvest every last grape on their vines. Some of the produce is to be left for the poor and the alien to gather. Later in Leviticus Moses declares to the people that the land on which they grow their crops doesn't belong to them anyway. It's God's land. "You are but aliens and tenants," he tells them, turning the tables.<sup>iii</sup> So, you may possess assets (like land or money), talents, and opportunities which are gifts from God, but they are not just for your personal enrichment and enjoyment. Implicit in this gleaning commandment is the idea that the poor and the alien have a right to be able to support themselves with your help. It curbs private interests that operate at the expense of those on the bottom of the economic ladder.

The Hebrew canon includes a book whose whole plot hinges on the practice of gleaning. Thanks to this provision in the law Ruth, who is a poor widow and a foreigner from a despised country, is able to survive and even thrive. She and her widowed mother-in-law Naomi have heard of good economic prospects in Judah so they have migrated across the border from Moab. There, providentially, Ruth encounters Boaz. Though prominent and rich, he is not greedy or stingy. He encourages Ruth to glean in his field and orders the young men he employs not to harass her. Boaz honors the law regarding gleaning as well as other Jewish laws which provide some protection for the vulnerable.<sup>iv</sup> The story of Ruth ends with a genealogy that makes her the great grandmother of none other than King David.

The book of Ruth was—and still is—a powerful antidote to our selfish instincts which don't want to make room for foreigners and don't feel any obligation to help the poor or consider their rights.

The next commands in our passage from Leviticus call for integrity in all our dealings with others. They prohibit stealing, lying, and fraud. God insists on truth and honesty in all our relationships. No fake news or covering up shady dealings. No slandering. No robbing others. No taking advantage of anyone, especially not the weak and vulnerable. If a day laborer works for you, don't wait and pay him the next day. When you're living from hand to mouth, you can't wait overnight for your wages. You need to buy something for you and your family to eat that night.<sup>v</sup> The commands specifically ban exploiting the deaf and blind, and by extension, anyone who is disabled. The law insists upon communal solidarity. The strong, wealthy, and able must take the needs of the weak as seriously as they take their own. Absolutely everybody must be treated fairly. That includes the well-off as well as the poor. The sixteenth century Swiss sculptor who first added a blindfold to the figure of Lady Justice got it right. As she weighs evidence in her scales, she must not be influenced by bank account size, skin pigment, gender, creed, or any other filters we see others through.

Our Leviticus text ends with the clarion call: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. That sums up the gist of all the ethical demands of the law. Jesus, as we heard in our reading from Matthew, agreed. He famously quoted this verse when asked by a lawyer about the greatest commandment in the law. First citing *the shema*,<sup>vi</sup> the command to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, Jesus next put this verse, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” on par with it. I like the way one Old Testament scholar translates it: “You shall love the life of your neighbor as you love your own life.”<sup>vii</sup>

Our church does a great job of practicing neighbor love. We shelter our neighbors who are homeless while they get their feet back on the ground. Recently, we worshiped with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors at Thanksgiving. Next week we will begin hosting a monthly Book Club for adults and children who literally live next door in Bethel Homes. First Presbyterian has a wonderful tradition of outreach to those beyond ourselves.

But what about compassion and concern for others as we consider matters in the public square? While our country is not a theocracy, Judeo Christian principles do undergird us. So the biblical command to love your neighbor does pose questions. What is to be our policy regarding immigration and refugees? How do we overcome the racial divide that still plagues us? Can we debate civilly, much less live with, those who have different views on President Trump, gay marriage, or who serves the best barbeque in Athens? Barbeque notwithstanding, these are complex issues, and the answers are not easy. Long before the lawyer who asked Jesus, Who is my neighbor?, the Old Testament itself struggled with the question. While there are some voices that spoke for exclusivity and tribalism, you could say, there are clearly others that said that the neighborhood extends beyond the borders of Israel. That is, neighbors include folks who are *not* just like you. For example, later in the chapter we’ve been considering (Leviticus 19) Moses says, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”<sup>viii</sup>

Maybe it’s empathy that’s the key to neighbor love.

Timothy Tyson wrote an autobiographical work of history which deals with race relations in the rural South.<sup>ix</sup> His father, a Methodist minister serving a church in Sanford, North Carolina, in 1964 invited Dr. Samuel Proctor to preach on Race Relations Sunday. Dr. Proctor was a leading black preacher and president of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College. When word of the invitation got out, Tyson’s congregation went up in arms. The night before Dr. Proctor was scheduled to come, Mr. Tyson called an emergency meeting of the church board in an effort to stem the controversy. “One phone call to cancel can end all this,” one man said. “It’s going to tear the church apart,” said another. Voices rose. Anger flared. Just as the meeting threatened to dissolve in an uproar, Miss Amy, a quiet, dignified old maid schoolteacher rose to speak.

“I don’t know the man who’s coming, except that his is the president of A&T. But I know our pastor, and you know him, too, and he’s not going to tear anything apart. And I don’t suppose Dr. Proctor is going to tear anything apart, either. If there is going to be any tearing done, we’re going to do the tearing apart ourselves.”

She went on to tell the silent roomful of her former students a story. “There was a case up near Chapel Hill recently,” she said, “where a teenage boy went around a curve too fast and was killed in a car crash. So they thought. He was down there by the side of the road and they were just waiting for the ambulance to come and take him to the funeral home. There weren’t any signs of life.”

“But then an airman from Pope Air Force Base stopped. He was home on furlough, and he saw the boy lying down there, and he scrambled down the embankment and opened that boy’s mouth.

He saw that the boy's tongue stuck back in his throat, and he ran his finger back there and pulled out that tongue, and then gave that boy mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. By the time the ambulance got there," Miss Amy said, "that boy was walking around alive as you or me. And the next week they had a big dinner up at the fire station out in Orange County for that airman, celebrating how he had saved that boy's life."

She paused, then said, "What I haven't told you is that the boy who had the wreck was white, and that airman that saved him was a black man. But that's the truth," she said, "and I want all of you fathers to tell me something." She looked searchingly around the room. "Now, which one of you fathers would have said to that airman, 'Now, don't run your black fingers down my boy's white throat'? Which of y'all would have told that airman, 'Don't you dare put your black lips on my boy's mouth'?"

The vote to stand with the pastor went 25-14. The next morning the sanctuary was slam full of members. They sang "God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power." When Dr. Proctor began, he deftly crossed the chasm which lay before him. "I have an enormous problem," he said. Everyone braced, expecting an integrationist harangue. "My football coach recently complained to me about two fruitless recruiting trips. One prospect told him he was going to go to UNC and the other to NC State. I just had to tell the coach, 'You know, that's the problem with all this integration. Coach, that's just the price we're going to have to pay.'" The congregation, divided just about evenly between fans of UNC and NC State, roared with laughter. That was the last mention of race that morning as the brilliant theologian went on to deliver an eloquent sermon about Jacob wrestling with the angel.

The Rev. Tyson, Miss Amy, the airman, the folks in Orange county, Dr. Proctor, and the members of that Sanford Methodist church that day in 1964, plus Moses, Boaz, Ruth, and I hope the Baptists at their North Georgia camp—all knew something about the royal law of scripture, as the book of James calls it: Love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>x</sup> And so do you.

The one glaring point about the text in Leviticus I haven't mentioned is the opening line "You shall be holy" and the pulsating refrain, "for I the Lord your God am holy." The holy, loving behavior that God demands reflects the very nature of God. At its best, the social vision of ancient Israel and of Jesus and his church is rooted in God's own character. Love your neighbor, then, because we'll perish if we don't but also because the God of love longs for us to be like him.

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<sup>i</sup> Commandments 1 & 2 (v. 4), 3 (v. 12), 4 & 5 (v. 3), 6 (v. 16), 8 & 9 (vv. 11, 16), 10 (v. 18); *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 1131.

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 5:33

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 25:23

<sup>iv</sup> Laws regarding redemption and possibly levirate marriage

<sup>v</sup> Deuteronomy 24:14-15

<sup>vi</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>vii</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Reverberations of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), p. 126.

<sup>viii</sup> Leviticus 19:33

<sup>ix</sup> *Blood Done Sign My Name* by Timothy Tyson (New York: Broadway Books, 2004). See pp. 74-80.

<sup>x</sup> James 2:8