

Sermon – Surprised by Joy
Sunday, February 19, 2017
Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 5:38-48
The Rev. Dr. Blythe D. Kieffer
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Leviticus, chapter 19, verses 1-2 and 9-18. Leviticus appears only once in the entire Revised Common Lectionary cycle, and in most years, Lent begins before the seventh Sunday after Epiphany, so Christians rarely listen to these words. This is unfortunate because we miss getting a glimpse at the heart of Israel's theology in the Holiness Code and seeing the parallels between the words of Moses and the words of Christ. Moses calls the people of Israel to acts of kindness, social justice, honesty, fairness and forgiveness. In doing so, the people reflect the character of their God, who is holy and who calls them to holiness. Listen now to God's word as it is recorded in the Book of Leviticus.

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. 9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. 11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. 12 And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. 13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. 14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. Amen.

Our gospel reading is Matthew 5:38-48. We continue to explore Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the Mount. Christ reveals a new call to holiness in words we certainly do not expect and often do not understand. These teachings do not advocate passivity or being victimized. These surprising words are a call to action; to hope, and unexpectedly, to joy! Today's reading includes two of the six antitheses Jesus' presents: You have heard it said...but I say to you... offering insight on revenge and loving one's neighbor. The word "perfect" in this passage is best defined as "complete." Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes God's sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Surprised by Joy”

The text: “You have heard it is said... but I say to you...” Matthew 5:38a, 39a

Let us pray. We are grateful, dear God, for the many ways you surprise us because of who you are. And now, may the words of my mouth and meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Surprised by Joy is the title of C.S. Lewis’ autobiography and the story of his conversion to Christianity. C.S. Lewis is a prolific English author of the twentieth century. His writings *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* have inspired children and adults alike to capture the mystery of faith and the love of God. This particular book, *Surprised by Joy*, unlike most, is especially personal. He shares how his early formative years shaped his faith and understanding of God. The joy for which he longed as a child, he found unexpectedly in the midst of the bitter-sweetness of life and in the arms of a God who embraced that life in Jesus Christ.

Each of us, when we take the time to reflect, remembers experiences in our formative years that have shaped our faith today. The first time I consciously remember making a commitment to God was the summer of my eleventh year at a church camp. Interestingly, what I remember most about that experience is a song we learned and sang during the week. “Joy Is Like the Rain” was written by Miriam Therese Winter, a Medical Mission Sister who today is a Professor of Liturgy, Worship and Spirituality at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. Serendipitously, she taught a course that my sister-in-law audited last fall.

I had forgotten about this simple song until I heard it again at a retreat while serving my first congregation and later on a medical mission in the Dominican Republic. To my surprise it brought back powerful feelings. It was one of those songs my sister and I would sing together in the car on summer road trips with our parents. I am certain we didn’t understand the meaning of the words then as I am sure that even today we cannot fully appreciate what it meant for Sister Miriam when she wrote it.

There is something about this song that touches my experience. The metaphor of joy being like the rain alludes to the paradox of life when things turn out differently from what we had planned or anticipated, and yet, in those very circumstances we discover an inner peace and insight into ourselves and God. Truth is often found in what seems self-contradictory or absurd. We often experience paradox in our life choices. I went into the ministry looking for answers to complicated questions and for certainty to sustain me and I discovered that only when I was willing to question the complicated answers of the church and tolerate the uncertainty that is a part of each of our lives would I begin to experience peace. I went into the ministry looking for happiness, somewhat naïvely, and I discovered that only when I was willing to enter with others into their struggle, disappointment and pain could I also share with them their joy and experience my own. And so indeed, joy is like the rain.

Just as life presents paradox, so does God who surprises us with generosity and kindness, who is holy and complete, and who gently reminds us that the more generous and kind we become – the more we reflect God’s character.

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

In Leviticus, God’s generosity is reflected in the law that forbade reaping the corners of the field – a widespread custom from remote antiquity which probably originated in the people’s fear of the gods. By leaving the extra crop, the corn spirits were appeased who would otherwise forsake the field.

But for the children of Yahweh, the God whose name was too holy to even be uttered, this custom reflected the covenantal relationship with their Creator and becomes a humanitarian act emphasizing God's generosity rather than God's need to be appeased. Love replaces fear. A love that is impartial. As much as God cares for the poor, not even the poor are God's favorites! God's justice is equitable, and God's people are called to be equally just and to love their neighbor.

In this time and place, in the history of humankind, in the middle of the Book of Leviticus, this message is surprising. However, it is not nearly as surprising as the message Jesus Christ brought or the questions he raised with the religious of the first century.

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus gives practical illustrations for the principle *overcome evil with good* and affirms his belief in the victorious power of goodness and benevolence. To meet revenge with a revengeful spirit only multiplies the evil.

These verses are not advocating passivity, neither are they encouraging peace at any price. That is not who Jesus Christ was or what Christianity is about. To strike a person on the right cheek, one must ordinarily use the back of the right hand. Such a blow was considered among the Jews a very real insult. To turn the cheek would be an active challenge to the one who insults. Defying him and expressing a willingness to be insulted again, if he dare, knowing the insult will not be returned.

The next picture, according to Abingdon Bible Commentary – is that of a law court where a cruel client exacts the severest penalty of the law by taking a man's coat. The defendant is urged to part with his cloak, his upper garment as well, and so make his adversary feel utterly embarrassed.

Rather than return evil with evil, one's kindness will expose and exaggerate the hatred of the enemy. Or as Abraham Lincoln said, paradoxically: Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them? The follower of Jesus who can attain this high ideal of loving the enemy reflects Christ's character.

Or as the New Common Lectionary explains: *The behavior of Jesus' followers is not in response to, not a reaction to the conduct of another. Neither friends nor enemies dictate the life-style of disciples. The faithful take their pattern from the God who never reacts on the grounds of others' attitudes and behavior but who acts out of God's own nature, which is to love and to bless, both the good and the evil, the just and the unjust. God is even kind to the ungrateful and selfish. Surprised?*

On March first we begin Lent and Christ's journey to the cross. In Advent, we anticipate God coming to us in the wonder of a child. In Epiphany, we celebrate the impartial God who comes to all of us. And in Lent, we remember the God who turns the other cheek, who gives the cloak, who goes the second mile, and who walks the Via Dolorosa (the Way of Sorrow).

When I was eleven years old I asked God, "How much do you love me?" and Jesus said, "This much!" and stretched out his arms...and died. In that death, we embrace the paradox of love, the gift of salvation and the hope that is ours. Indeed, joy is like the rain! Amen.