

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 7A)i – February 23, 2014
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11; 16-23; Matthew
5:38-48

By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

A few years ago, the University of Virginia raised some significant monies to endow the teaching of what they called “practical ethics” in both their undergraduate and graduate programs. Now, I wonder if the ethics espoused by Jesus in our gospel reading are ever discussed in such a “practical ethics” curriculum:

“Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Are these ethics of Jesus practical enough to make it into the curriculum at UVA, or any other such institution? How would the Business School handle them? What about the Law School; or the Psychology Department, or the School of International Relations? Would *US News & World Report* elevate the University of Virginia’s national ranking among major universities if Jesus’ ethics were included? Don’t bank on it!

In our gospel today, Jesus extends and radicalizes the “practical ethics” of his day. No longer just the acceptable and practical proportionality of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”; nor does he leave even the Golden Rule as it was most often minimally and negatively stated, “Do not do unto others that which you would not want done unto you.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the fourth week in a row in which we are called to grapple with different parts of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. As I stated last week, Jesus called forth coherence and congruence of our thoughts and words and deeds, and in his Sermon on the Mount he creates an “ethics of perfection,” as it were—because we need both right attitude and right speech and right action, in right relationship, to be complete, to be whole, to be faithful in this world—and not just individually, but as the whole human family.

Jesus had elsewhere re-affirmed that the two supreme laws are to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. “On these two commandments depend/hang all the law and the prophets” is the way he put it (Matthew 22:40). By going to the heart of God’s law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, Jesus, in fact, *extended and transcended* the law rather than loosen or abandon it. As he said earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matthew. 5:17). In the portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which we hear today we see him create an ethics that would have us go above and beyond what would ordinarily or practically be required or expected—a “supererogatory” ethic, as ethicists call it. And so, we are summoned by Jesus to go the extra mile, to go beyond old ways

of relating; to love not just the lovable and those who would readily love us back—but to love the unloved and unlovable; yes, even to love our enemies. How easy is that? This is undoubtedly difficult and seemingly impractical, and nearly impossible at times. Yet, this ethic has been practiced and with some effect, contrary to the belief of many in the efficacy and inevitability of violence. For example, in colonial India, such a way of “loving your enemy” as Jesus prescribed came in the form of Gandhian nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience which found success there, since the British, for the most part, did not wantonly slaughter unarmed people who neither injured others nor destroyed property. And since that time some 85 other non-democratic regimes have been brought down, mainly through nonviolent mass mobilization – Tunisia being the most recent work in progress. People have said that the Sermon on the Mount is impractical...and that’s because they haven’t practiced it.

Yet, in a different context, for example, facing the ruthless state terror of the Third Reich, most of us, I would say, would have agreed with the poet Charles Peguy who said, “People who insist on keeping their hands clean are likely to find themselves without hands.”ⁱⁱⁱ The loving response for many in that situation meant getting their hands quite dirty in armed resistance, and all-out war.

Shifting again, for example, to the deep South in the late 1950’s and early 60’s, we saw Jesus’ love ethic acted out for the most part through direct nonviolent action. And it prevailed, not so much in changing the attitudes of those who loosed attack dogs or fire hoses on peaceful protestors, or who incited lynchings; but it did have effect in leading local business, religious and professional leaders eventually to deny support to such brutality.

In so many other settings large and small, public and private, “love your enemies” is practiced, appropriate to different situations, ways that take both the enemy into account and hold them accountable—prosecuting them if need be, and certainly preventing them from doing harm again. “Love your enemies.” Jesus doesn’t say they aren’t your enemies and that there won’t or shouldn’t be conflict in our lives personally or globally if we just love them. But he points to a new way, a way that is neither a denial of, nor submission to, the injustice, *nor* a reactive way that is bent toward retribution, retaliation and revenge. More than 65 years ago, General of the Army, Omar Bradley, said, “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount...ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”^{iv} And more than 50 years ago Adlai Stevenson stated, “We do not hold the vision of a world without conflict. We do hold the vision of a world without war – and this inevitably requires an alternative system for coping with conflict.”^v

Much has passed since Bradley and Stevenson spoke those words, and it may be that nothing short of the ethic Jesus espoused in his Sermon on the Mount is relevant and is, in fact, the most practically effective ethic. Or as William Sloane Coffin put it, “As God is not mocked, we shouldn’t be surprised that the day is dawning when the so-called

ethics of perfection are becoming the ethics of survival. When we live at each others mercy, we then had better learn to be merciful.”^{vi}

But *how* do we address deep-seated conflict between people and nations that could employ means other than through denial or submission, or through violence or military force?^{vii} Let’s look at means and ends, very briefly. It must be said that the ethical consideration of means and ends, if it serves no other purpose, should concern itself with the *number* of means available. When Jesus said, “Love your enemies” he was not denying the real fact that conflicts are inevitable. What he was denying was that hateful action and especially armed conflict were the *necessary means* of dealing with conflict. In other words, if other effective alternative means are available to address wrongs and accomplish the ends of justice and a just peace – and in that, address root causes of the conflict – then by all those means should the ends be pursued. Time and again, when violence in this world has been met only with further violence, that has spelled only a further spiral of violence.^{viii}

There is a wide gulf between, on the one hand, those for whom the ends always justify the means, and those, on the other hand, for whom the ends never justify the means. The former too often narrow their range of means – as psychoanalyst Abraham Maslow stated, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” And the latter so often wind up “on their ends without any means,” as Saul Alinsky put it. And for most of us in the middle, truth and expediency – as well as decisiveness and thoughtfulness – cannot be separated from each other when struggling to determine whether a particular end justifies a particular means.

Finally, there is an underlying attitude that informs our choices of ends and means. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, those “whom you would change, you must first love.” In other words, those whom you would change, you must first try to understand and listen to. You must see them as children of God in a shared humanity with yourself—as your neighbor, even as a brother or sister—despite all unrighteousness, twistedness and pain they cause. And you must understand your own corruption and shortcomings before God as well. As St. Augustine’s warned, “Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself.”^{ix}

So, in conclusion, the ethics of perfection of Jesus may be the most practical of ethics after all, because the same old ways of denial and submission, and of retribution and retaliation, just keep us all in a heap of trouble. We need to learn new ways of dealing with enmities and enemies, not just at an international level, but all throughout our own lives—a new way with the difficult spouse, the school bully, the old grudge with a family member or colleague or former friend. That starts by imagining or visioning the fundamental goodness and unity of humanity including respecting the dignity of your enemy, and then sowing the seeds of reconciliation even where the soil for doing that is parched or even toxic;^x and, finally, whether or not reconciliation is possible, nonetheless risking the possibility of forgiveness—for forgiveness is love’s greatest, and sometimes only, power.^{xi}

ⁱ See also Epiphany 7C and Propers 6C, 19A (#1), 19A (#2), 20C

ⁱⁱ from Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a, the "Great Principle"; also found in similar form in most world religions and philosophies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, "Wrestling with the Devil" (New York: Riverside Church, March 4, 1979)

^{iv} General Omar Bradley, from a speech delivered on Armistice Day, November 10, 1948 – fuller quote: "With the monstrous weapons man already has, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescents. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have many men of science, but too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death.

The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. This is our twentieth century's claim to distinction and to progress."

^v Quoted from his address – Adlai E. Stevenson, "Working Toward a World Without War" at the United Nations, November 15, 1961. And 40 years ago Israeli statesman Abba Eban stated, "History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives."

Alfred North Whitehead wrote in 1925, "We cannot think first and act afterwards. From the moment of birth we are immersed in action and can only fitfully guide it by taking thought." Forty years later, in a similar vein, William Sloane Coffin reiterated that people and nations tend to live first by formative events, and only then by formal principles. Our nation, for example, holds up principles of democracy, self-determination, and the protection of rights, out of our experience in the Revolutionary War era. We hold up principles of nationhood and equality, out of our Civil War experience. As well, we speak of appeasement, with Munich as our reference, and of radical evil with the Nazi Holocaust as our reference. We hold up the value of resolve with the remembrance of the Berlin airlift, and the importance of skillful and resourceful crisis management by looking at the Cuban missile crisis. We also understand tragic overreaching by looking at Vietnam. We as a nation have certain common experiences that have become road markers and guideposts for navigating moral approaches to action. Now added to the common experience of our nation (and world) are the horrific events of (our non-action in the face of) genocide or mass murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Congo and Syria, as well as the horror of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing "war on terrorism" that has reached an ever-expanding scope in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere abroad and at home, the lessons from which we will be working through for a long time to come.

That these lessons, more, or less, learned, came out of wartime experiences, doesn't justify the wars themselves. Nor does it infer that war itself is inevitable.

^{vi} Coffin, *Ibid*. Coffin added a reference to Jesus' beatitude at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."—defining "meek" as not weak and submissive, but rather as having power but exercising self-control. With that understanding Coffin stated, "And if we don't learn to be meek, nobody is going to inherit the earth."

^{vii} We could take a variety of principled positions – and our diverse religious traditions would give us room to do so – from which we could assess the many ethical dimensions of various possible courses of action in our present and future conflicts around the world. The Christian Church over the centuries has promoted a number of positions ranging from pacifism on one end of the spectrum to crusading "holy wars" on the other end, and all sorts of positions in between, e.g. "just war" (with its many conditions, including the recently re-discovered "Responsibility to Protect" (intervention on humanitarian grounds against grievous human suffering even within the sovereign borders of another nation)). Rather than

putting forth any one principled position as being more theologically or morally or politically or pragmatically correct than any of the others on how to handle conflict, it may be more important at this time instead to look at some important realities regarding means and ends, so that we may become more able to ask questions regarding *how* to address deep-seated conflict between peoples and nations that, hopefully, could employ means other than through violence or military force.

So, means and ends (with thanks to Saul Alinsky). *First*, to say that morally questionable means always corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles. On the contrary, the whole arena of preparation for, and engagement in any war – and even decisions not to engage – even with the most righteously stated ends, was, is and will always be corrupt, dirty, bloody and savage. Of course, life itself can be seen to be a corrupting and dirty process, from the time children learn to play their fathers off against their mothers in the politics of when to go to bed – and throughout our lives. The one who fears getting dirty fears life.

Secondly, the morality of a means depends in part upon whether that means is employed, for example, as a last resort (especially to avert some imminent attack or defeat when it would be most needed) *or* at some other time, for example, if it were used merely as an act of punishment or revenge or to pre-empt some undetermined act of hostility, or used just because its use seemed “inevitable.” Judging ends and means, therefore, is determined also by taking into account motives on all sides, possible alternatives, intended *and* unintended results, foreseen *and* unforeseen consequences, and obviously the actual situation itself and just how big the stakes are (and how those stakes are defined). Ready, Shoot, Aim is not the right order of things in this process. Decisiveness must be accompanied by thoughtfulness.

Thirdly, in the realities of war in which we are already engaged *and* for which we are preparing (or find ourselves unprepared) – whatever form such warfare takes – the ends will be said to justify almost any means whether we like it or not; whether it’s right, just and good *or* whether it’s wrong, unjust and evil. For example, international relations have had, for a long time, agreements such as the Geneva Convention rules on the treatment of prisoners – or on the use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons – which have been generally observed *only* because the other side or particular allies may retaliate in kind.

^{viii} History is made up of actions in which one end results in other ends. The end of one world war resulted in another one. The end of that world war resulted in a Cold War. The end of the Cold war has spawned many smaller ethnic, religious, sectarian, civil and inter-national wars, which, in turn, threaten the possibilities of a new world war. And into this context came 9/11 and its aftermath. Or as Jesus put it, when you think you’ve cleaned out one unclean spirit, watch out, because it can bring seven other spirits more evil than itself to enter and live there (Luke 11:24-26).

^{ix} As William Sloane Coffin stated, “If you love the good you have to hate the evil. But if you hate the evil more than you love the good, you just become a damn good hater” – and that can perpetuate the very evil you hate. Or as Hannah Arendt summed up, “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”

^x The peace sought by too early a reconciliation can come at the expense of justice or truth and can involve an accommodation and capitulation to the imbalance of power. And although reconciliation is not the first step in many struggles for peace with justice, that doesn’t mean that the seeds of reconciliation can’t be sown all along the way during the conflict. For example, simply listening to the other person or other side’s point of view is a seed sown for reconciliation. Such listening does not prevent an effective way of addressing your just case against injustice; rather, it has you enter into a process of opening yourself to the humanity of the other side, truly hearing and trying to understand. This involves touching a little of the fear, the hopes, the confusion, the feelings, and even the goodness of people who could easily be perceived as your enemy. In doing so, such listeners find their work for justice (whether personal or public) is not weakened, but, in fact, is strengthened. Compassion and the fight for truth and justice can walk hand in hand. Furthermore, sowing the seeds of reconciliation through listening even in the midst of

big struggles rests on the belief that the Spirit of God exists in each and every person. It may be buried deep, but it is there somewhere.

^{xi} As the poet William Carlos Williams wrote,
“What power has love *but* forgiveness?
In other words, by its intervention,
What has been done can be undone.
What good is it otherwise?” William Carlos Williams, “Pictures from Brueghel and other Poems.”

See also Reinhold Niebuhr: “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. ... Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.” – Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History ((1952); Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 63.