

February 20, 2011

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

Our readings today might be some of those places in the Bible that match up to Mark Twain's quote about reading the Bible:

"It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Something that has helped me with today's readings is from a study of the ancient Greek and Aramaic languages that invites us to receive these words, less as a conditional statement or an instruction from God through Moses, or from Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount- less of a conditional statement of instruction along the lines: "You must be holy because God is holy"... "You must be perfect because God is perfect."

But possibly, the translation should be understood as a teaching about how the more one is related to God, the more one will be holy or perfect in ways that match up to how God is holy or perfect in love toward us... and toward all people.

In Leviticus that kind of matching up to God's heart, includes things like care for the poor or the foreigner, and justice for both the poor and the rich. In Matthew, it includes things that match up to Jesus' way of forgoing revenge, and loving not only the ones who love us back, but also our enemies as well.

The more we are in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ- who loves even his enemies, the more those same kinds of things will be showing up in us.

And I think I see what he meant, when Mark Twain said it was the parts of the Bible that he did understand that were the hardest on him.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Yikes.

In my Sunday morning discussion group last week- as we studied today's reading from Matthew, We didn't have a lot of responses to share when it came to naming our enemies.

But it's a week later and I am more certain now. My enemy is WATSON! And I want him destroyed before he really does some harm... but that's how I usually feel about enemies in general.

[Watson was the IBM computer designed to compete with humans on the Jeopardy game show]

From a news article about last week's Jeopardy match:

Watson came out the winner, earning a \$1 million prize. IBM said it would donate all of Watson's winnings to charity.

As runner-up, Jennings received \$300,000. Rutter won the \$200,000 third-place prize; both human contestants said they would donate half their winnings to charity.

Do we see that? Not only did he win, but Watson gave away all his winnings to charity. He not only beat the humans, he's even a better Christian!

Watson is my enemy and I do not love him. I don't care if they sneaked him onto TV beginning on Valentine's Day! I do not love Watson and he is my enemy. I am not glad for his success.

Obviously, I have a way to go in my relationship with Jesus. Jesus may be the great enemy-lover, who invites us to be one too. But I am far from perfect, and you might as well know it.

Sometimes it's hard to agree on who's the enemy and that's some of what has made Jesus' words so overwhelming for people over time. I wonder if what we need sometimes is a big enemy that everyone can agree on.

But when we identify the enemy, how do we allow Jesus' words to transform us... and to transform the world? As Christians, are we actually, always to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us... or those we do love? Be honest-- does that sound wise? Or foolish?

What's ironic to me, when I think about things like this, is the apostle Paul. When he wrote about what was wise and what was foolish, he drew a stark contrast between God's wisdom and human wisdom. "...you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."

What's so ironic about the apostle Paul is that people were glad about him.

It's a great thing to be glad about something God does in life. Letters from Paul to his friends and loved ones in the churches he served, show us the love shared (we don't see their letters to him, but it's easy to recognize that people were glad about Paul being a part of their lives).

But it didn't start out that way... ..It might be an overstatement to say that Paul was something like a modern day terrorist- but you know, when I think about it, it can't be very much of an overstatement. Paul was a persecutor of the early Christians. He sanctioned and approved of the mis-treatment and even the execution of people just because of their Christian faith. But then, while on his way to Damascus- where he was going to continue the practice of terrorizing and injuring the people of other Christian communities- Paul was miraculously saved by Jesus coming to him!

No wonder people were glad that Paul's life was saved and his life was changed by the love of God through Jesus Christ!

I suspect that it took them a while to trust that Paul's change was for real, and that he was safe to accept into their hearts and into their communities. After all, he had been their sworn enemy.

But I wonder if they prayed for him... and if so, when did they pray? After his conversion only? Or did anyone pray for him like Jesus taught.

“ love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”

I'm going to be upfront with you right now. I'm not going to pray for WATSON. No I am not. I doubt that I'll even pray for the IBM company and its workers- but I might if I ever got to know any of them.

But will we, should we pray for our real enemies... is that foolish enough human doings, to match up some to God's doings.

When it comes to following Jesus, and when hearing a call to holiness as a child of God-- If our Lord appeared to some terrorist in our modern world like he did to Paul on the road to Damascus, and loved him or her into new life... would anybody be glad?

Even though last Sunday in my discussion group we didn't come up with a large list of who-are-our-enemies, in a couple of follow-up emails from group members that were shared with me during the past week, several ways to identify who are our enemies were described.

One person shared with me how enemies can be those who are not good for us-- who tempt us with un-wholesome activities that do no one any good. Such a person is not a true friend, are they? So perhaps that is one way to understand who is an enemy to us.

Sometimes the concept of identifying an enemy can be sort of abstract... but still so terribly real in our lives.

Without a doubt, we know very deeply today how enemies can be in the form of some of the terrible ups & downs of life- as an aged loved one came to the end of our treasured times of sharing life together- and it seems almost impossible to let go or to somehow say good bye. Or as a dearly loved friend and member of our community struggles to survive and progress from severe injuries after a terrible car accident.

No “person” can be identified as an enemy in such things-- but we know a struggle as though against a powerful enemy, just the same- don't' we?

How can we understand God with us in a way that leads us to lives that match up to God's ways, when it comes to dealing with even such nameless (but still so real) enemies?

Last week at our choir rehearsal, none of these sad happenings we are sharing with our loved ones today, had yet occurred. But toward the end of our preparation for singing today's anthem “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”... one of the choir members shared how a certain phrase just felt so powerful for some reason.

Here is the phrase:

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

I want to lift up that phrase as our invitation to faith today.

Because it's not our efforts at being holy or perfect that are making the difference. Rather, it is our increasing contact with our holy God, through which we are transformed, and the world is transformed, to be more Godly. More holy. More perfect.

Our weaknesses are no barrier. Our struggles or sorrows may seem more than we can bear. The magnitude of this world's challenges call for a wisdom and an approach to those challenges that are more than human. We may falter at the call to love and pray for our enemies.

But, as the words of the old hymn invite: "Jesus knows our every weakness..."

Prayer: O God of the strong and the weak, the young and the old, the friends and also the foes-- grant to each this day we pray, the grace that is sufficient through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.