

## **Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**

**February 23, 2014**

### **Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**

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

It is tragic, I think, that we need to have a special month for Black History. More than 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, after the non-violent resistance models of people like Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., it is shameful that African American and African histories must be set apart rather than woven into one human fabric. Yet, that is the reality in our broken world, so I have reluctantly agreed to this observance including ending our time together this morning with what is called the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Oh, I do not have a problem with the hymn. It is powerful and beautiful. But I am torn, because most of us have not trod that stony road. We have not suffered that chastening rod--or any of the lingering effects of the oppression and racism. But, sing it we will. I trust it will be with respect, with humility, and, yes, in a posture of repentance.

Repentance, you may ask? After all, none of us were engaged in the slave trade. To the best of my knowledge, none of my ancestors were, either. Though I don't know for sure. Had I lived in the 18th or 19th century, would I have been involved? I hope I would have been on the side of the abolitionists, but I really don't know. What I do know is that every day of my life I have enjoyed privileges that others have not, simply because I was born white.

Our church does not have a particularly shining history. The Episcopal Church did not split over the slavery issue, as did some other Christian denominations like the Presbyterians and Methodists. But church historians do not count that as a virtue. It was more a matter of niceness and politeness, not creating a fuss.

Our texts today are challenging. All of them. In the Leviticus reading, Moses calls us to be holy. We are created in God's image, after all, and God is holy. So should we be. In

his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that our bodies are temples. They should be holy. And Jesus says we are to be perfect as God is perfect. These are tall hills to climb--rather high expectations!

The Leviticus reading comes smack dab in the middle of the "holiness code." We don't tend to pay much attention to this except to debate the biblical literalists around sexuality vs. archaic rules about mixing foods, fabrics, and crops. But here we have a real concern for others--a law that says that the fields are not to be reaped to the edges and the vines are not to be fully stripped so that there are leftovers for those who have nothing--the aliens, the poor. These laws that help us live as holy people seem to be not just about us, but how we treat others, especially the weak, those on the edges.

We jump forward hundreds of years to Jesus. He is talking here not to the rich and privileged, but to a people oppressed. He begins with the ancient code that they all knew: "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth." This seems violent and bloody to us. And it is. But we need to know that its purpose was to limit violence. Only retribution equal to the original damage was allowed. That way, it might prevent a vicious cycle of one-upping one another with higher and higher levels of revenge. But for Jesus, this was insufficient. He said that if someone punches us in the cheek, we must turn and let them do it again. If they take our cloak, we must offer our undergarment, too. And if we must lug their baggage for a mile, we must smile and go father. "Turn the other cheek" and "go the extra mile" have actually become part of our common language.

Really, Jesus? Seriously? We're not to defend ourselves against injury or the loss of our possessions? Unfortunately, this text has often been misunderstood. That we are to be Christian door mats. Even allow ourselves to be abused.

But that's not it at all. We need to remember that in his world, the ancient world of the Middle East, only the right hand was used to gesture. The left hand was for certain, well, intimate purposes that made it unclean. So, see this.....[demonstrate hitting or slapping right cheek with right hand]....it's only possible with a backhand slap. That signals that the other is not an equal but an inferior. It is meant, not as a fight among equals, but to humiliate. To put down. Turning the other cheek requires that you be hit

as an equal.

As for the cloak: a poor person could get a loan by offering the cloak as collateral. However, the cloak had to be returned at night because it might be the only warmth a poor person would have. So, a big deal was made each morning of taking and retaking the cloak. Humiliation, over and over again. Now, offering the undergarment, too, would render the person naked. Nakedness was shameful, but the shame was to the one who *caused* the nakedness. Soldiers were permitted to conscript others to carry their loads for a mile. Cheerfully going on for the extra mile was a way of thumbing the nose at the oppressors. "You do not control my life."

Jesus is teaching a third way. It is not retaliation. It is not submission. It is more like reconciliation. It is a creative, non-violent way of maintaining some dignity. A way adopted by people like Martin Luther King, Jr.

How different from our headlines these past weeks--stand your ground legislation that has gone far beyond self defense. Or this week's reports of a former deputy undersecretary of Defense for intelligence, now part of a far right religious organization who made a speech using part of the book of Revelation to claim that Jesus was a tough guy, a man's man who would use an AK-15 assault weapon at his second coming. And that we should all go out and buy them, because it is biblical. Furthermore, the second amendment is directly from Jesus. I don't think so.

Goodness. We have a high calling. It is not easy to follow Jesus. Not as easy as following a checklist that we are to mindlessly obey. It is a way of living, a walk. And it goes beyond "live and let live:" The Levitical laws tell us that we are to reprove our neighbor or be guilty ourselves. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that we cannot be silent but must speak out. "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who perpetuates it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."

Jesus says that we must be perfect as God is perfect. In these weeks of the Olympic Games, we may see perfection as being measured by style and by form, by tenths or

even hundredths of seconds. No room for error. But the Greek word for "perfect" here is "telios." It means mature, complete. Fulfilling the purpose for which you were created. And what is that purpose? Simply to truly love God and one another--not just our friends but our enemies! Those with whom we have nothing in common. Those who have hurt us or who disgust us or we don't even notice. Easy? Oh, no! Impossible, really, by ourselves. But together--and with God--we can be the holy people we were created to be---and change the world!

Amen.