

Epiphany 7, February 19, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Who, here, thinks that, if you're presented with a reasonable task, you can make the right choice? If you answered "not me" to that question, see me afterward; I have some bridge stocks I'd like to sell you!

Here's your task: I want you to imagine you have in front of you two choices: either your favorite dessert – let's say it's a chocolate cake – and a bowl of fruit salad. (In case you haven't yet guessed, I'm describing an experiment done by a Stanford University professor). Which would you choose: chocolate cake, or fruit salad? Now don't answer yet! There are some caveats: you have to make the healthiest choice; AND you have to remember a sequence of numbers while making that choice! Some of you will have to remember only 2 numbers; others will have to remember 10 numbers.

Now, what do you suppose happens? The folk who have to remember 2 numbers choose cake 42% of the time, but those who have to remember 10 numbers choose cake 63% of the time. What that means is that you don't have as much control over your choices as you think! Our basic desire for fats and sugars trumps the rational override with only the mildest of mental interference.

And that's true because of your reptilian brain! That's basically the brain stem, which is the oldest and smallest region in the evolving human brain; it determines our brain's general level of alertness and regulates the vegetative processes of the body like breathing and heartbeat. The reptilian brain is also where the "flight or fight" response resides - important when danger's near and a quick response is necessary. And also (and this is why I'm telling you about this!) the reptilian brain is also where we get our need for revenge or retribution, which means that our reptilian brain isn't particularly helpful to us when it comes to navigating how we live in community, and it's especially not an asset when it comes to living a life of faith.

**All of today's readings are inviting us to live as individuals and in a community in ways that are counter to our very basest instincts for survival. Each one is calling us to "raise our standards" to create a world counter to that driven by our reptilian brains.** And today we're living in a world where it seems like the reptilian brain is taking over! There are now those who are actively stoking the boilers of hell, spreading fear and dysfunction, seeking revenge and retribution, as if somehow our brains higher functions have been turned off and all that's left is to lash out in anger.

But perhaps that's at least in part a gift to us; it helps make it abundantly clear – crystal clear – where our responsibilities as people of faith lie as we seek to find ways to engage with each other and our world that reflect the core values of our faith.

And it's here that today's readings prove their value, because they offer us as an alternative to fight or flight, revenge or retribution. What they offer is all about what it means to be holy.

Leviticus describes the characteristics of being holy as generosity toward the poor, honesty and integrity, self-control, and equal treatment for all irrespective of the other's identity. We are to be actively thoughtful, kind, honest, generous, and loving; we are to treat our world and its inhabitants the way God would treat them. This is notably not the way that the reptilian brain driven people live!

The psalmist acknowledges his need to understand what God is calling him to so that his faith isn't blind, so that he doesn't become a "holier than thou," sanctimonious believer, someone who's living the opposite of a sacramental life of faith. That needs work, the psalmist says, because it's not human nature to live that way. Again, there's this awareness that intentionality is central, that he – and we – need to step beyond base instinct and reach for the wisdom from God, a wisdom that seems foolish, Paul later says, to those who live "in this age."

And that brings us to Paul, who we see reminding the Corinthians that while Jesus is the foundation of everything, they're charged with the responsibility of being the builders. If the foundation is holy – reflective of the values Leviticus describes – then the Corinthians are called to build holy things on top of that foundation, including their personal identities and behaviors.

And then there's Matthew. Same theme – though Matthew gets very specific when he quotes Jesus. Holiness, Jesus says, is about transforming unjust relationships. We don't have time to look at them all, so I'm going to focus on "going the extra mile."

Roman soldiers were allowed by Imperial law to force local civilians to carry their packs for up to a mile. To carry that pack an extra mile was an active act of resistance, but a subtle, loving resistance, not a passive, hateful rejection of those who were required by the Roman law of impressment to enforce it – the actual soldiers. Think about the consequences of this response: it made it so much harder for the soldier, because there's no attempt to provoke his reptilian brain's anger and consequent easy rejection. Instead, the 'extra mile' response invites the soldier to see his pack-bearer as a human being. AND it also means that the soldier is no longer empowered to coerce the civilian – he has no other recourse. The balance of power has shifted; the civilian has forced the soldier to treat him as a human being. So this is about restoring the civilians' human dignity and his sense of worth while not trying to destroy the soldier's human dignity and sense of worth.

Interestingly there's silence about the effectiveness of this sort of nonviolent resistance. Why? Because it's more concerned with the proper attitude, with the ethical responsibility of an individual, than it is with the actual outcome. And that's almost certainly because it's being written to a community which felt powerless over against Imperial Rome, which was unlikely to respond ethically. Human acts, Jesus says, have to have a certain quality even when they don't achieve desired results. ***What they do do is to create the possibilities for transformation.***

Here's the thing for us, though; we who live in a democratic society are *not* powerless. We have not only the ability but the responsibility to participate in public dialogue, and to engage the issues we care about as people of faith with those who represent us in government. We're especially called by our faith to preserve our public voice in both unveiling and addressing the

wrongs we see in our culture. As has been said by contemporary biblical scholarship (especially Lidija Novakovic, from Bethel University, St. Paul, in a 2006 paper to the Society of Biblical Literature), “It is very easy to lose the ability of perceiving injustices, especially when they are embedded in the system and have the appearance of legality.....Christians today have the responsibility to address them verbally, even at the expense of personal comfort and security.”

Later this week I will represent our diocese as part of a group of interfaith denominational leaders when we meet with Governor Inslee. One of the topics is about post-secondary education for those in our prisons – remember, those in prison have always been of special concern for people of faith. Studies show that the average rate of recidivism – re-offending– for any inmate is 34%. If they are given one year of post-secondary education that rate drops to 18%. If they get a second year, 10%. If they graduate, 5%. It saves us – the taxpayers – over \$22,000 per inmate per year – every year – on incarceration costs alone. And those no-longer-inmates find work at a rate of 75%. Everyone wins.

Except that there are those in the legislature who oppose this because their reptilian brains demand retribution and revenge. Here is an example – a place – where we can bring our vision of holiness to bear, where we can act, where we can make a difference, where we can promote the vision of holiness that permeates our scriptures: generosity toward the poor, honesty and integrity, self-control, and equal treatment for all irrespective of the other’s identity, being actively thoughtful, kind, honest, generous, and loving; by treating world and its inhabitants the way God would treat them.

Matthew reports that Jesus had one more standard for us to live up to: being perfect. Don’t be anxious! It doesn’t mean you have to be a Type A obsessive – whether it’s about physical beauty, or intellectual acumen, or spiritual heroics – the actual translation of the Greek word we get as ‘perfect’ actually means this: ***be children of God, sharing in the divine nature that’s marked by stunning and indiscriminate acts of generosity and love to all.***

So be holy, be perfect. Take responsibility, speak out. Act. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”