

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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February 19, 2017  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18  
Matthew 5:38-48

### THE IDENTITY OF OUR NEIGHBOR

Have you ever known someone who was such a dreamer that it seemed their connection with reality just wasn't there? I'm talking about someone who sees a major problem and says, "No problem – all we have to do is X, Y, and Z." But of course, with a little analysis, we discover that X is totally beyond our capacity and that Y can't happen until U, V, and W are put in place, while Z would require the whole world to be flipped upside down. I love dreamers who are in touch with what is possible and what is practical, but those dreamers who are not in touch with such things, are actually quite dangerous.

That leads me to the question – was Jesus a totally impractical dreamer? We hear his words about turning the other cheek after being hit on one already. We hear what he says about giving demanding people even more than they demand. We hear his command to not just love our neighbors, which is hard enough, but to consider our enemies as neighbors and to love them too. That sounds pretty much like something beyond our capacity, that can't happen until a lot of other things are put in place, and that it would require the whole world to be flipped upside down. Thanks for being a dreamer, Jesus. We do need dreamers, but we also need practicality. So you go ahead and talk about your unrealistic options about what we are to do when we face real-world problems and we'll smile and say, "Isn't that nice?" and try not to let you see us roll our eyes.

However, on second look, it just may be that Jesus was being more practical than it looks like at first glance. The context he was addressing was one where there was the powerful military presence of Roman troops which were occupying the homeland, which in their cruelty were likely to backhand someone's right cheek or demand that someone give what they had, whether it was the very clothes off their back or the effort necessary to carry a soldier's backpack like a beast of burden. Jesus starts this section of his teaching with the statement, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" Indeed, his audience had heard that statement; it was part of the Hebrew law that actually sought a just response when someone injured another person. The idea was that if someone knocked one of your teeth out, you were not to express your vengeance by knocking out all of the other person's teeth. But 'an eye for an eye' wouldn't work with Roman soldiers. For if the Hebrews were to respond with equally damaging force as that which the soldiers used, the Romans would just ratchet it up a few notches and blind everyone in a whole village. It did not make sense to 'fight fire with fire' in this situation since the other side was more than willing to burn down the whole countryside.

Besides, the goal for people of faith was not to allow the actions of others to set the agenda, but to focus on living out their own identity. Jesus was teaching them not to respond in kind to a show of force. Instead, he encouraged them to show their own particular strength, which was a spiritual one. Their strength would be a refusal to resort to force, it would be generous in nature, and it would share the burdens of even those who treated them with contempt. This offered them a way to keep from losing their identity as children of God, acts by which they did not have to demean themselves by stooping to the others' violent and uncaring ways.

Jesus was telling these Hebrew people not to pick out the commandment from Hebrew scriptures that could open the way for them to strike back in anger. Rather, he pointed them to the core of their law and identity, which we heard in our reading from Leviticus. As people who belonged to the Lord, they were to be sharing what was harvested with the poor and alien, they were to do what was right and kind, particularly for those who had special needs. Then the passage concludes with what Jesus would later focus on as a part of the greatest commandment: "You shall not hate in your heart;... you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge..., but you shall love your

neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” For our part, we might be focused on trying to limit the identity of who is to be considered neighbor. But the identity on which Jesus calls upon his followers to have as their main focus is their own identity. He says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...” He was telling them that loving others, regardless of what those others had done to them was the way to live out their identity as those who were part of God’s family. He was helping them to see that love is more powerful than hatred, and that a seething hatred with a desire for vengeance within their own hearts was actually their worst enemy.

There was a biographical movie from a number of years ago called “The Hurricane.” The lead character, professional boxer Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter, played by Denzel Washington, had been a victim of the false testimony of a racist, resulting in him having been unjustly put in jail for twenty years. A teen-aged boy named Lesra, who had read about the former boxer’s situation, had taken interest in him, and had gotten his foster parents involved in working for a retrial for the man. Before the retrial, the two have this conversation. From his prison cell, Rubin looks on the boy and says, “We’ve come a long way...little brother...” Lesra responds and says, “Rubin, I just want you to know - if this doesn’t work, I’m bustin’ you outta here...” “You are, huh?” says Carter. Then after a moment of silence, Carter says quietly, powerfully, “Hate put me in prison. Love’s gonna bust me out.” And Lesra responds, “Just in case love doesn’t, I’m gonna bust you outta here.” And Carter laughs and reaches out, touches the boy’s face to wipe away a tear and then clenches Lesra’s hand. Then he whispers, “You already have, Lesra.”<sup>1</sup> Lesra’s love had already freed Carter from that dark prison of despair and loneliness.

Love, in response to an enemy? Love, in response to hatred? Jesus sounds impractical because he calls for a response that is practically impossible. To love like he says sounds pretty much like something beyond our capacity, but the One to whom we belong has a much greater capacity than do we. Oh, such a love couldn’t happen until a lot of other things were put in place, like patience and creativity and determination. Yes, that’s true, and God can supply those too. Oh, but love in response to an enemy, in response to hatred would require the whole world to be flipped upside down. No, actually, love is the only thing powerful enough to flip the whole world upside down. It is the only thing that can keep us out of a self-imposed prison of hatred and desired vengeance. And wouldn’t you agree that this world needs to be flipped upside down? No, Jesus is not an impractical dreamer. He is the most practical dreamer and doer and enabler. And he calls us to remember whose we are as we seek to follow him.

<sup>1</sup>“The Hurricane,” directed by Norman Jewison, Universal Pictures and Beacon Pictures, 1999.