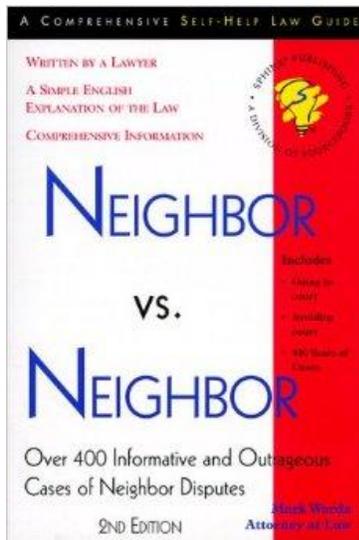


“Neighbor Issues”

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

Rev. James Ramsey, February 23, 2014

Most of us have neighbor issues. Books have been written on the subject.



The LORD spoke to Moses about neighbors, about sharing with those who are hungry, about speaking truthfully and respectfully, about honoring those with whom you work, and dealing gracefully with the handicapped. The LORD insisted that attending to these neighbor issues has everything to do with holiness...

Attending to our own neighbor issues has everything to do with our spirituality.

If you are to draw near to God, Moses was to say to all the congregation, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the LORD's own word, the desire of God's own heart, instruction and sentiment we know Jesus also shared.

So...it may be that right now you have an issue with a particular neighbor of yours. Either you find yourself in conflict with someone who lives next door OR you have an ongoing dispute with a co-worker OR you are having a heated disagreement with a friend OR you have communication breakdowns in your family...and the thought might have crossed your mind:

“You know, I wish I lived on a desert island, away from all this unrest. If it were just me, with no one around to bother me all the time...I could be happy and at peace.



But consider the story of the man stranded all alone on an island. When



he was finally discovered, his rescuers asked him about the three huts they saw there. He pointed to the first two huts and said, "This one is my home and that one is my church." One rescuer pointed to the third hut, and what about that hut, what is that? The man grumbled somewhat under his breath, "That was my *former* church."

We all have neighbor issues – and that's likely NOT going to change. Neighbor issues are so common to the human condition, that it might be we would have neighbor issues even if we didn't have neighbors!

Jesus knows this. He also knows that it is essential in God's Kingdom to find a way to deal with these issues in a loving, engaged, reconciling way. It's not that disciples won't have neighbor issues...it's that we deal with them, resolve them, move past them – for the sake of the peace of Christ, the up-building of God's people, and for our own spiritual well-being.



The whole Sermon on the Mount could be subtitled "Neighbor Issues." Jesus elaborates on an earlier point. He had said – "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus upholds the ancient law of Moses, but he takes exception to how it is being interpreted

by the established teachers, how it is being acted out in the real world. So Jesus couches his words within this framework, "You have heard that it was said (that is, you know the Pharisees rigid interpretation of Moses)...but I say to you (that is, here is what God really meant by his original words to Moses.)

Jesus highlights the biblical “law of retaliation in kind,” what scholars call the *lex talionis*. We find an example in Exodus 21:22 and following, where it is prescribed that a fine should be paid for a specific crime, but if there is any harm that follows the judgment (we might say – if neighbor issues continue), then, and I quote, “you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”



Similar references can be found in Leviticus (24:19-20) and Deuteronomy (19:16-21). Such a law, which might seem harsh to our modern ears, was for the due process of administering justice, it was actually meant to limit vengeance and curtail violence – it was not for private indulgences in getting even.

Jesus seems to sense that the old law is being remembered precisely for such private indulgences by individuals. He rails against such vengeful behavior and calls for his followers to actively resist the temptation to even the score.

The conduct of Jesus' disciples cannot be determined by that of the one who harms and hurts. Jesus' intention is NOT to rewrite the old law, NOT to improve the ancient legal system, but RATHER, to lift up the vision of God's new world, and for his followers to demonstrate conduct that proclaims God's rule of peace and justice.



Jesus preaches: “do not resist an evildoer.” He then shares four applications:

1. When someone strikes you
2. When someone takes you to court
3. When someone forces you to go a mile
4. When someone seeks a loan from you

We can see that in each application it is assumed that the other person has taken the initiative to harm or victimize, but the disciple is to “change the game,” --

Think of it as a crafty Karate move – you are attacked and you respond in a way your neighbor or foe is not expecting...only, unlike in Karate, the disciple doesn't attack, but instead acts with kindness, showing no hostility. Jesus does not expect simple non-retaliation or passivity, but rather positive acts of good, generosity, love.



A follower of Jesus may be victimized, but that follower is NEVER to think and act like a victim. Jesus was not a victim. Jesus gave his life willingly. So, Jesus' followers are to take intentional steps of healing and helpful behavior, even toward those who are violent and abusive.



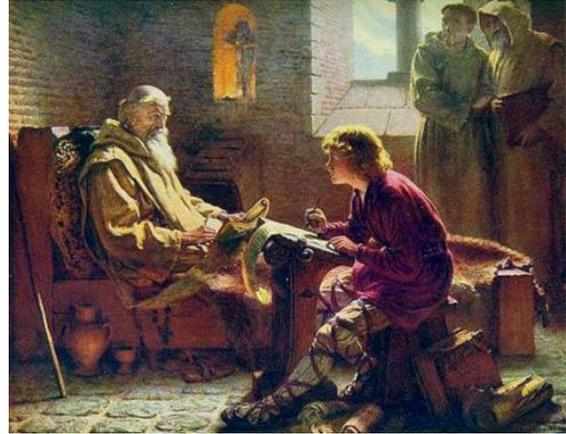
Jesus lived and taught the way of love – and at every turn, opposed the way of hatred and vengeance. Jesus would have his disciples love all people, regardless of their friendliness or hostility, regardless of their rank or ability. In fact, our behavior as Jesus' followers should not be a

knee-jerk reaction to the conduct of our neighbor. Neither friends nor enemies should dictate our lifestyle as disciples. We take our pattern from God, who does not react on the grounds of others' attitudes and behavior, but rather out of God's own sovereign nature, which is to love and to bless both good and evil, both the just and the unjust.

God has this remarkable propensity to be kind to the ungrateful and selfish. We are called to model God's grace and generosity. We cannot do that when we let the conduct of others determine our response...for if we are always RE-acting to others, we are hardly acting faithfully, and we are no better than tax collectors and Gentiles.

The Venerable Bede (673 AD - 735 AD) – an English monk of the 8th century AD,

“Venerable Bede Translating the Gospel of John” by JD Penrose portrays a man widely regarded as the greatest of all the Anglo-Saxon scholars. He wrote around 40 books mainly dealing with theology and history. His most famous work, which is a key source for the understanding of early British history and the arrival of Christianity, is titled The Ecclesiastical History of the English People.



Bede tells an interesting story about “neighbor issues:”



The king gifted Bishop Aidan with a first-class horse to help him get across rivers, or to respond to some urgent need. Aidan's practice had normally been to walk everywhere, and sometime later he met a beggar who asked for his help.

Without a second thought, Aidan dismounted and gave the beggar his horse, complete with its royal harness. Aidan was known for being unfailingly kind and generous to the destitute.

The king heard of this, and as they were going in for a meal, he accosted him: “My Lord Bishop, why have you given away our royal horse which was intended for your own use? We have many less valuable beasts, which would have been good enough for a poor man. I chose that horse especially for you!”

Aidan replied without any hesitation: “My Lord King, what are you saying? Surely this foal of a mare is not more valuable to you than this child of God.”

They went in to eat, and the bishop sat down at his table while the king warmed himself with his queen and her lady. Suddenly, he recalled the bishop's rebuke. He threw down his sword, and ran and knelt at the bishop's feet to beg forgiveness: “I will never judge how you use my money in the care of God's children again!”



When we can love, without distinction or reaction, we are approaching what Moses called holiness – what Jesus termed “perfection.” I, the LORD your God am holy, God says. God loves in this way...God is perfect.

And I know what you are thinking: Yeah, God is perfect, we are not.

But the “perfect” of which Jesus speaks is the Greek word *teleios*, which can also be translated “complete” or “mature.” So Jesus is not so much referring to moral flawlessness, but to the kind of Godly love that is not partial or immature. Partial and immature love embraces those who embrace us and rejects those who reject us. Perfect love is to love in the manner of our God, who is without partiality.

So, this perfect *teleios* love has to do with wholeness and authenticity of relationships, genuine relationships that show forth the hidden, but real, rule of God. Relationships that constantly tend toward real “neighbor issues.” Such relationships, between you and me, between you and your neighbor, you and a stranger, (you and your enemy, even) demonstrate extravagant moves toward reconciliation, new attitudes and understandings between men and women, simple truth telling, outrageous expressions of generosity, and the distinctive care even of one’s foes. When our relations exhibit these holy traits – our life will be blessed and our neighbors will take notice...to the glory of God!



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.