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Closer to the Kingdom

IT didn't take Jesus days to preach but for us this is the 3rd Sunday we've heard the Sermon on the Mount and we have two more left before we have heard all Jesus had to say that warm and sunny afternoon so long ago when he sat down and began to teach. He began with blessings. Then he said that in his teaching "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." Not one letter will pass from the Torah but his hearers will be invited to think about Torah in a new way. Jesus will open the Torah and invite his hearers to join him in God's reconciled world, a world in which they will respond to one another and to all they meet in a new way.

I imagine that as he spoke, the crowd on the hillside became smaller and smaller, as people drifted away, confused and unsettled by what they were

hearing. Perhaps by the end, only the disciples remained. I imagine that if people left, today's portion probably was the one that did it – it is one thing to hear anger equated with murder and ogling a passing pretty girl the same as cheating on your wife, and swearing equals lying but to be told to love one's enemies probably was going too far.

We probably agree with them. But what if Jesus' words are not prescriptive but descriptive? Although it sounds like rules comparable to the portion of Leviticus we also heard this morning, what if Jesus is describing God's kingdom just as the priests who wrote Leviticus were describing the ideal world in which God's people were called to live?

We usually think of Leviticus as a book of rules – rules about what to eat, who to marry, how to participate in worship at the Temple. But Leviticus was, and is, more than that. Leviticus, as we heard this morning, tells everyone how God's people can live in God's world, how they can be what they were made to be, God's image in the world. In God's world, the priests who wrote Leviticus told the people, the poor and the alien have grain to grind for bread and grapes to press for wine. In God's world, no one cheats, no one steals, all are paid fairly. In God's world, the disabled

are protected. In God's world, all are equal under the law. In God's world, no one seeks vengeance, bears a grudge, or hates their family – no matter how much they got on each other's nerves. In God's world everyone loves their neighbor as themselves. In God's world, everyone is holy because God is holy.

In God's world.

It sounds ideal – just perfect. In fact it sounds like heaven on earth. Of course, the problem with heaven, as Michael Battle says, is “its idealism.” No matter if you think Leviticus was written early on when the people entered the promised land or by the priests in Babylon waited to go back to the promised land, probably not every rule, every law, every instruction was kept.

Farmers sometimes harvested all the grain. Owners of grapes vines sometimes left only the bird-pecked, insect-nibbled grapes. People lied to their families, friends, themselves. They certainly weren't as holy as God. They knew the world they lived in was broken and that the ideal world was a tall order but everyone assumed it was possible.

Years had passed since the time the priests had written Leviticus to when Jesus taught on the hillside. Everyone listening to Jesus lived wanted to live in that world of Leviticus but the world they lived in had changed from those days in the past. The world seemed even more broken. It was a long way from God's ideal world, and God' world seemed far from possible.

Small farmers who might have left grain or grapes for the poor and the alien had been into debt and lost their farms to absentee agri-business landlords. People were forced into building Herod's cities – wages withheld or denied. Occupying soldiers marched along the roads – loading their packs onto the backs of passers-by who no matter where they had planned to go instead had to accompany the marching army. Was God's world possible any longer? How could God's world coexist with a world of debt, forced labor, and occupying armies? Should Jesus' listeners compromise or resist, withdraw or rebel? Does Jesus have an answer to their question?

Yes! He does!

Jesus' answer is they are to resist these enemies – those who drove them into debt and took away their land and those who marched along their roads, intimidating them with weapons. They are to resist, but not with sword, not by withdrawing, but resist in a new way, a Kingdom way.

As Milan Machovec, the Czechoslovakian philosopher said,

The enemy must be resisted in so far as he serves the powers of darkness, although it would be better to say that the power of darkness should be resisted rather than the enemy. He should be seen not as the servant of darkness but as someone who is capable of a future conversion. Therefore, although he uses evil means – despotism, the sword, force, darkness – one must not answer him with these same means. If one answered him in kind, with lies, deceit, violence, and force, one would be denying oneself and him the future and the possibility of change, one would be perpetuating the kingdom of evil.¹

When Jesus said to carry the soldier's pack not just the one mile the law demanded but an extra mile, to pay the lender not just the amount owed

¹ Milan Machovec quoted by Walter Wink in *Jesus and Nonviolence: a Third Way*, Fortress Press, 2003, p. 69.

but more, and to give to everyone who begs, he asked those listening to live in the Kingdom – live in God’s reconciled world – and invite those soldiers, those lenders, those beggars into the Kingdom also. Jesus asked his listeners to be like God – to be “all that they could be” – perfect, whole, peacemakers, merciful, pure in heart, salt and light - to be images of God. He invited them to be holy because God is holy. He invited them to live with the assumption that God’s world, the Kingdom was possible.

Did they do it – those listeners on the hillside? Who knows? But probably when a Roman soldier or a Herodian soldier stopped Jesus on the road, ordered him to drop whatever he was carrying, and carry that soldier’s pack, I am sure he did it and carried it farther than the mile the law demanded. And if for some reason, he had fallen into debt, he would have given more than was demanded in payment. And when a beggar stretched out his hand, Jesus had something to give. Jesus never asked his listeners to do anything he would not do himself.

He doesn’t ask us either. So what does this mean for us here in Annapolis? We don’t have armies marching down our roads. The banks

want us to pay less than we owe, not more. We provide shelters for the homeless – the Lighthouse and cold-weather. We have minimum wage laws.

But we know there are people we don't like and who don't like us; people who would injure us, strike at us or our families. There are evil doers out there, and like the Romans, they are armed. Like then, there are loan sharks, thieves and scam artists. Our world isn't God's ideal world either. Our world is broken.

For us every day the question is the same it was for those people on that hillside so long ago, "What might we do differently to turn these encounters these people we don't like and who probably don't like us, with people we fear – into Kingdom moments?" "What might we do differently?" Because just as what the people on the hillside was doing didn't work, mostly what we do doesn't work. If we don't do something different, if we don't model living in the Kingdom, living in God's reconciled world, there is no possibility of change for them or for us. Nothing changes when we strike back or answer them in anger. Nothing changes when we see them only as

enemies. Nothing changes when we join them in “the kingdom of evil.” Nothing will change if we can’t see them as neighbors, living with us in God’s world.

We can’t do it alone. That’s one reason we have church, one reason we gather on Sundays and pray together for those we love and for these we find it hard to love. Together we can resist the kingdom of evil and strive for the Kingdom of God. With one another for support and with God’s help, we can make small changes to this beautiful broken place in which we live. And together we can, every day, in small ways, with God’s help, see Christ in our friends and our enemies, and bring this world, our world, a little closer to the Kingdom and to the promise of heaven on earth. Amen.