“Love and reproof”

Lev 19:1-2, 9-18; Ps 119:33-40; Matt 5:38-48 (23 February 2014)

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” It’s the golden rule, found in every religious and ethical tradition. Ethicists refer to it as the law of reciprocity and use it as the foundation of their systems of ethics, the one uncontested principle from which you can develop every other command or precept. It may even be innate, something we’re born with. According to some child psychologists, children understand the principle before they’re able to speak. It’s simple, straightforward; and we should all just focus on following it or applying it, not arguing about what it means. But if it were so simple, we wouldn’t keep talking about it. It’s not always so simple.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” is found in Leviticus 19:18, one of our lectionary passages this morning; Jesus is quoting it in Matthew. To set the stage for Matthew 5, I want to begin by looking more closely at the two key verses in Leviticus 19, verses 17 and 18. They have what scholars call a chiastic structure: These are structures like a, b, b, a. If you put this in a simple square, you have a b on top and b a on the bottom. If you connect the two As and the two Bs, you get an X, which in Greek is ‘chi.’ ABBA is the simplest version; there are variations of increasing complexity. It’s a common literary device in the Old Testament. Like all literary devices, it’s a kind of shorthand, it allows you to say a lot without using a lot of words.

We can divide the two verses, Leviticus 19:17–18, like this:

A You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin

B You shall reprove your neighbour and not incur guilt because of him

B’ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people

A’ You shall love your neighbour as yourself

Now connect the As and Bs.

A You shall not hate, you shall love

B You shall reprove, not take revenge

To fail to reprove your neighbour is to hate your neighbour. To love your kin is to reprove her or him. In other words, the meaning of ‘love’ in the command to love is not about charity, or feeding the widows and orphans – that was covered back in verses 9 and 10. Rather, ‘to love’ is

to reprove, to resolve a dispute without taking revenge; that is, without causing your neighbour the same loss he inflicted on you. Or, to put it in more modern, culturally familiar language: it's about how we live together when none of us are perfect. To say that love means reproof may be counterintuitive to our common perception of what it means to love your neighbour. But the connection between love and reproof is found elsewhere in the Old Testament: in Proverbs especially. To be wise is to love reproof. If we had more time we could look at some stories in the Old Testament. They would show that reproof was regularly practiced in the Old Testament. In a world without police, or the massive court system that we have today, it was essential that there be ways to solve the disputes that regularly arise between people. Without such mechanisms for conflict resolution, violence would be pervasive.

I want to get to the debates in Jesus' day and how he responded to them. But before I do, I'll mention two details in these verses in Leviticus it will be useful to know. First, the stress is on 'reprove.' In English, all of the commands in these two verses have the same form or structure: you shall, you shall not. But in Hebrew in the phrase, "you shall reprove," the word translated as reprove is repeated, literally "reproving you shall reprove." It's a way of adding stress to the command. This is the only command in these two verses that is stressed. It's hard to bring this out in English translation, we would do so either by intonation if we're reading out loud, or by italics in a printed text: You *MUST* reprove your neighbour. These two verses really are about reproof. Second, you are commanded to reprove rather than taking vengeance or bearing a grudge. 'Taking vengeance' and 'bearing a grudge' are probably distinct, one following the other. For example, when your neighbour's goat buts horns with your best goat and kills it, you're not allowed to head over to his place and kill his best goat. That's vengeance. If you think about it for a minute, you may accept that it's also justice. It's reciprocal. Each of you has suffered the same loss. But it's wrong to do this; what you are to do is go to your neighbour and negotiate a compromise that satisfies both of you. However, if your neighbour isn't willing to negotiate, you are not to bear a grudge. In other words, you are not to wait for an opportune time to pay him back. There are many reasons you shouldn't; we don't have time to explore them in detail this morning but you can probably imagine a few – for example, you might be mistaken about which neighbour's goat is the culprit. We tend to think that the Old Testament is violent and Jesus is a pacifist, but it's worth reminding ourselves that Jesus is the culmination of a long history of attempts to control and limit violence.

Let's move now to Matthew 5 and the context in Jesus' day. I think that there was fairly widespread consensus among the Jewish theologians that the command to love one's neighbour was about reproving people you thought were sinners. I stress this because it's counterintuitive to how we've learned to understand the command to love our neighbours. But it shouldn't be surprising – it's the Old Testament understanding of the command.

Among those who did so was the group responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of the Dead Sea scrolls, known as the 'Rule-book of the Community', has the following: "Each person should reprove his fellow truthfully, in meekness and compassionate love for the man. No-one should speak to his brother in anger or muttering, or with a hard neck or with spiteful intent and he should not detest him in the stubbornness of his heart, but instead reproach him in the day of his offense so as not to incur a sin himself for the fault of his fellow." It's easy to see why a devout group of people would focus on reproof. Imagine that you believe the following: Keeping the law leads to life, disobeying the law leads to death. If you believe this, and you care about your neighbours, you want them to live, not die. If sin leads to death, you really should try to stop people from sinning. You can probably imagine where such convictions often lead. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls are texts with long lists of sins and their punishment. These include such sins as falling asleep in the worship service, or spitting in the presence of a more senior member. There is a fragmentary list of names with offenses that one popular translation of the Dead Sea scrolls has entitled "Register of Rebukes." They kept lists of sinners, the sins they had committed, and the punishments they had received. The community did not survive, communities of the perfect rarely do.

So, there was a commonly accepted understanding that to love means to reprove. But there was disagreement among Jewish theologians about another part of the command: the meaning of 'neighbour.' Ancient Israel was a homogeneous community. Everybody believed in the same God, everybody followed the same law. At least in theory. But in the time of Jesus, Jews were living in a context that was similar to ours in some ways. It was a pluralist, multicultural society. No religious group was in charge. We can consider a contemporary example: the pope still runs the Vatican and can preach to people about how they should live, but he has little authority over them. Average Catholics freely ignore much of the church's moral teaching. Similarly, in the time of Jesus there was a High Priest in Jerusalem, the sacrificial system was operating according to the law, and the Pharisees were free to preach. But no doubt the average Jew was a bit like the average Catholic; he obeyed when it was convenient and ignored the Pharisees when it suited him. If you're a preacher or a theologian, someone who believes that disobeying God's law leads to death, you may find such a situation intolerable. In which case you have several options: one response to a situation like this is to withdraw into a pure church: to form small, disciplined, closed communities made up of people who have committed themselves to the same values. The Rule of the Community I mentioned earlier states clearly that neighbours are those in the community – even other Jews do not count, if they are not members of the community. You restrict the people for whom you are accountable. The rest, well, they can keep sinning and go to hell. Another response is violence: you try to force people to live a certain way. And there is a whole range of options in between these two. All of the options were chosen by at least some Jews in the time of Jesus: some chose to withdraw, some chose violence, others tried to find a middle way. The question, who is my neighbour, had become

very complicated. In Luke 10, a lawyer comes to Jesus and asks Jesus what he must do to live. Jesus responds, “love God, love your neighbour.” In response, the lawyer doesn’t ask, “what is love?” He asks, “Who is my neighbour.” He wasn’t asking “Who do I need to help?” He was asking “Who am I obligated to reprove?”

What about Jesus? I mentioned earlier that Jesus is the culmination of a long history of reflection on violence and how to reduce it. In Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus makes explicit the implicit non-violence in Leviticus. Jesus does not do away with reproof, he still sees it as integral to the life of the community, and outlines how it should work in Matthew 18.

Mennonites have long insisted on a simple understanding of Jesus’s words. Followers of Jesus will not resort to violence under any circumstances. I think that is what Jesus meant. But as we all know, the command not to respond to violence has been used in destructive ways. We have used it to silence the victims of violence: women and children especially. We have used it to avoid the difficult work of reproof within the community, we have not always practiced Matthew 18, reproof within the community, when we should.

I want to suggest two ways to complicate our understanding of Jesus’ words. First, we should stop thinking of people as neighbours or enemies. We readily read Matthew 5 in a dualistic way: we have friends, and we have enemies – enemies slap us on the cheek and arbitrarily take our cloaks, our friends don’t. Jesus does use the word ‘enemy,’ but he undermines the distinction: God makes the sun shine on the righteous and the unrighteous alike; God sends rain to all without distinction. Some of you may recall the adult ed class we had last year with guests from other religious traditions. One of them, a Muslim women, made the point. It’s great that we want to love Muslims, the enemy, she said, but it’s a problem that we think of them as enemies. Peace requires that we stop dividing people into friends and enemies. All people are our neighbours.

A second complication. We spontaneously read the words of Jesus in Matthew 5 as if we are always the innocent victims of violence. It is often true. Many of the first followers of Jesus were powerless and regularly subject to violence. Some of you have been innocent victims of violence. But it isn’t true of my experience. Marilyn asked me six weeks ago to preach today, since then, I have tried hard to recall a time when I was the victim of violence. I can’t think of a single incident. I have experienced the odd moment when I’ve felt humiliated, but nothing that has upset my sense of personal security. If Matthew 5 has a word for me, I have to read it not as a victim of violence; I have to hear it as a word of reproof. In other words, we should think of ourselves not as those who reprove our neighbours but instead as those who are being reproved. The command to love my neighbour is not about finding creative ways to reprove my neighbour; it’s now about how I will respond to my neighbour when my neighbour reproves me. To love my neighbour is to accept reproof rather than escalating violence. When your

neighbour comes to you in anger, and takes vengeance instead of reproving you, we should not respond in kind, we should absorb his anger rather than escalating it.

One of my tasks in this sermon is to help us discern whether we are being called to support victims of human trafficking in the context of a building project. We still need to invest a great deal of prayer and discernment before we make the decision. For me, the connection between loving enemies and supporting victims of human trafficking looks like this: Most of us, especially we who are white males, benefit daily from a system that depends on unacknowledged violence against those who are not white and not male. We are not the victims of violence; we are, actively or passively, complicit in perpetrating violence. We are not always aware of our complicity. I have become more conscious through our discernment so far of how I benefit from human trafficking. We are able to buy inexpensive food in part because of the labour of trafficked farm workers. My knowing that this is so is already a kind of reproof. How should I respond? There are many ways – buy fair trade as much as possible, for example. But there are few responses that require us to look at the victims face to face. Those who work in conflict resolution know that perpetrator and victim need to meet for there to be resolution. I'm not suggesting that this be the primary reason for participating in this mission. But for me it would be a valuable benefit, a spiritual benefit. In the language of the book of Proverbs: those who are wise love reproof. Will I be a neighbour to the labourers? Will I be someone who responds to reproof? May we discern wisely, and chose a path that will lead to peace.