

**Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48**

**How many of you watched the Super Bowl? Did you see that advertisement from Anheuser-Busch, the one that depicted a young Adolphus Busch arriving in this country as an immigrant and making his way to St. Louis, where he meets the man who will become his business partner? As with almost everything else going on right now, the commercial was interpreted as making a political statement and lines of controversy were quickly drawn. Some people celebrated the commercial as a rousing portrayal of the strength and grit of immigrants. Others disparaged the ad as an example of a huge company sticking its nose where it didn't belong. No matter how much a company spokesman claimed that "beer should be bi-partisan," the debate quickly turned to partisan bickering. What that ad raised for me is how polarized we have become as a nation, how quickly we run to take sides.**

**So this morning let's look at that ad and its fallout through the lens of Leviticus and Matthew. This morning we have just heard two of the Bible's most well-known Scripture passages. Even people who are not Christians know that these sayings come from the Bible: Moses' words in Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus' words from Matthew: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."**

**The question arises. Who is my neighbor? And...Who is my enemy?**

**The passage from Leviticus that we have just read has to do with living as God would have you live. God's people are called to be holy as God is holy. And that makes us pretty uncomfortable. It's fine for God to be holy. Everyone knows that holiness is one of God's characteristics. But most of us on any given day would not describe ourselves as holy. We think of holiness as something impossible, utterly beyond our reach. Most of us**

**think that holiness is reserved for a few select people, like Mother Teresa or Pope Francis or Nelson Mandela. Lofty, famous people who we will never meet in person. We think of holiness in terms of noble deeds and self-sacrifice. Our discomfort even leads us to turn the idea of holiness into an insult – being “holier than thou.” This way, we “regular” people get to let ourselves off the hook.**

**God commands Moses to speak to ALL the congregation of the people of Israel. These passages are not directed only at the famous, or the lofty, or the spiritually fit and toned, or those who have nothing else to do all day.**

**Holiness is a way of living that God sets before you, a way of living that guides your everyday activities, large and small. Over the past few weeks, we have been exploring what discipleship means, what it means to walk in God’s direction. Think of taking a hike at the State Park or in the national forest. The path is blazed with markings on trees or with guideposts to let you know that you are on the path. That’s just how it is here – God sets out guideposts so that you can follow. This is what being holy looks like on the ground:**

- You are holy when you share your bounty so that someone who is hungry can eat.**
- You are holy when you deal honestly with those who you employ and those who you do business with.**
- You are holy when you tell the truth, when you refrain from lying or gossiping.**
- You are holy when you refrain from making life more difficult than it already is for someone who is disabled.**
- You are holy when you act with integrity, when you are fair to everyone, rich and poor, when you don’t hold a grudge.**

**You are holy when you love your neighbor as yourself. Your neighbor meaning every single person that you encounter as you go about your daily life. The person who is richer than you and the one who is poorer. The person you employ and the one who employs you. The person you have known your whole life and the one you have just met. Your fellow citizen and the foreigner living in your land. The blind person, the deaf person, your family and your tribe. And in this global community, neighborliness extends outward, to those who make your clothing, those who grow the food you eat and those whose labor brings it to your table, those whose labor allows you to heat your home, drive a car, take vacations, and check your email on your phone.**

**Loving your neighbor – that’s the easy part. Now we turn to Jesus’ words in Matthew: “You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

**Who is your enemy?**

- Is it the person living next door with the dogs that bark continually?**
- Is it the player on the other team who body-checked you or is it the referee who didn’t notice?**
- Is it your sibling who gets more attention than you do?**
- Is it the politician who wants to raise your taxes or the one who wants to cut them?**

**Is it Paul Ryan? Is it Chuck Schumer?**

- Is it the Spanish-speaking laborer who is working on the roof of your house?**
- Is it the guy on the corner panhandling who looks fit enough to hold down a job?**
- Is it my boss who criticizes your work?**
- Is it your colleague who voted for the candidate that you voted against?**

- Is it the person who posted on Facebook about that Super Bowl ad or is it the person who responded with cusswords and insults?

Think for a moment about someone who you would call your enemy. I'll bet you have someone in mind right now. So how about trying this: In the coming week, every time you see your enemy or think about him or her, take a moment to pray. Pray for that person, pray for yourself and pray for your relationship. And then try this: take time in the coming week to actually listen to what that person says before jumping in with what you want to say. So much of choosing sides has to do with what people say.

On January 29 at our annual meeting, we adopted a new purpose statement for our congregation. The first part of that statement is this: "God's purpose for Immanuel Lutheran church is to WELCOME and EMBRACE one another in God's love..." Loving your neighbor and loving your enemy are intimately connected to what it means to love God. We are created in God's own image. We are created *in* love. We are created *to* love.

None of this is easy, and Jesus knows it. The work of loving your neighbor and loving your enemy is just that: work. It means to swim against the tide of prevailing human ways, especially in our divided world. Jesus' words are not intended to set impossible goals or to put you to shame. Jesus is setting out God's vision of God's world. Jesus is giving us a glimpse of life in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom that he came to proclaim, the kingdom that he ushered in with healing and forgiveness. This kingdom, this community that belongs to God is filled with people just like us, people who struggle with love and hate. We are not alone. We don't have to do this by ourselves.

Jesus commanded his disciples to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." There's another word that trips us up. The word that is translated as "perfect" is the

**Greek word “telos”. And it has a broader meaning than morality and behavior. *Telos* has to do with the goal, the end point, the purpose of an action. To become what Jesus calls “perfect” means to become what God intended for you to be. It means to live out your God-given purpose, your God-created uniqueness. It means to live as the beloved child of God that you are, loved and able to love. To be perfect, to be holy, means to walk on God’s path, in God’s direction, with the guideposts and the blaze markings of God’s laws and commandments to show the way. It means to walk in the path of discipleship.**

**We fail at this, over and over. But the promise we have is this: Jesus walks alongside us on this path. When we fall, we have his promise that he will heal and forgive us. We have his promise that he will continue to work in us and through us. We have his promise that where two or three are gathered in his name, that he will be there. He is right in front of you here and now, in the bread and wine, the gifts of his body and blood.**

**Come to the table. Receive the One who loves you. And then go and walk on his path of love.**