

Check your privilege

by Dave Feick

February 23, 2020

In our scripture readings this morning, the writer of Leviticus calls us to “Be holy as God is holy.” And Matthew ends with Jesus saying, “Be perfect as God is perfect.”

No pressure there, right?

At a workshop a week and a half ago, we were told, “We’re flawed, we’re not meant to be perfect.”

Antony Gucciardi, motivational speaker and creator of quotes, said, “I have a lot of respect for genuine people. They might not be perfect, but at least they’re not pretending to be.”

These seem to fly in the face of the call to be perfect.

When I was a student at Lutheran Seminary, interestingly enough, we had to learn a bit about Martin Luther. And one of the things we learned was that as a young Catholic priest, Martin Luther spent hours in prayer confessing all of his sins. And yet, as he was leaving his place of prayer, perhaps at the altar or maybe it was at the confessional, he remembered more sins and needed to go back and confess some more. I’m sure it nearly drove crazy both him and the priest to whom he was confessing. In his determination to be perfect and holy, he came to the realization that it was impossible. And he realized, too, that his sins had been forgiven through the work of Christ. He need only accept that grace and move on.

These commands or suggestions or whatever they are to be holy or perfect, he would have suggested were ways to work one’s way into the kingdom. But by the grace of God, we are already made perfect and holy.

Well, hopefully you’ve learned in life not to take Bible verses out of context. And this is definitely one of those cases. There is a need for context in these cases to provide some clarity.

Whereas often in the religion of the Bible, holiness and perfection relate to keeping of purity laws and offering right sacrifices, these two passages, like many others tell us what is more important.

The command in Leviticus probably goes contrary to standard farming practices. But here, farmers are told to not be so diligent in harvesting every last grain or grape or berry, but to make sure you leave some in order for the poor to also have food.

Holiness, then, in God’s view, is to ensure there is enough for all. In the book of Ruth, those who collect what the harvesters left behind are called gleaners.

Gleaners were people who picked up grain left in the field by the harvesters. In the story of Ruth, it seems that her future husband, Boaz, had farm workers, women gleaners who gathered what his harvesters missed or dropped. But he and his workers also recognized what the law said about gleaning, so that when Ruth showed up in his field, he had compassion for her and ensured that she and her mother in law, Naomi, did not go hungry.

Nowadays, we have combines called gleaners. The intention is that nothing be left behind.

In a Google search of the word gleaner, www.thefreedictionary.com says People also ask:

Is gleaning illegal?

The answer that is given is:

Today it is usually **illegal** to go “dumpster diving” in search of food. **Gleaning** amounts to trespassing on private property, after all, or it may violate municipal ordinances. ... Yet stores may not realize that it is entirely legal to donate food that has gone beyond its “sell by” date.

My first year out of high school, I attended Hesston College in Hesston, Kansas, and during the month of January, our Interterm, volunteered at a children’s home in Reynosa, Mexico. The office for the home was across the border in Pharr, Texas, where one or two snowbirding seniors who volunteered for the home, went around to the various restaurants collecting leftover food for the home. So while we were there, we had lots of fried chicken, pizza and spaghetti. Not bad meals for kids and college students.

But according to a blog post entitled, “The Lost Right of Gleaning” in 2014 at least in some places it is sometimes a criminal act to retrieve food that had been thrown away.

But in the fall of 2014, Rob Greenfield (appropriate name perhaps?), an activist, took a bicycle trip across the USA with the purpose of calling attention to the amount of food that is wasted. He spent months on the road, surviving entirely on food that he pulled out of dumpsters behind grocery stores and pharmacies.

Typically Greenfield would arrive in town on his bicycle and start to rummage through dumpsters. He usually emerged with perfectly good food – bunches of bananas, apples, boxes of unopened crackers and cookies, packs of soda, bottles of iced tea, and a smorgasbord of other perfectly edible food. Then he would take a photo of the haul of “waste.”

In a trip that took him to some 300 dumpsters, Greenfield estimates that he recovered over \$10,000 worth of food and fed well over 500 people. On his website, Greenfield posted many photos of his dumpster harvests. Today, his website shows the many ways that we can be saving the planet.

Dec 18, 2014

www.resilience.org › [stories](#) › [the-lost-right-of-gleaning](#)

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I don't know what our Canadian laws allow – if dumpster diving, or binning as it is now called, is considered illegal. We've taken to locking our dumpsters at our office, but more because the binners would usually leave garbage scattered on the ground in their search for something worth salvaging. Still, it would appear that our cities and our countries generally are not following the guidelines to be holy as given in Leviticus. With the exception of people like Rob Greenfield.

The Leviticus passage goes on to list a number of things that keep us from being holy. Stealing, lying, swearing falsely, profaning God's name, oppressing or robbing your neighbor, not paying your workers when their wages are due, treating the deaf and the blind unkindly or judging unjustly, slandering, hating, taking vengeance.

In the end, holiness comes in loving your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus' words in Matthew 5 take that one step further, calling us to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love your enemies.

Turning the other cheek and going the second mile are about so much more than allowing someone to take advantage of you or to suffer further abuse at someone else's hands. It's more about taking back your dignity and not allowing someone else to have power over you.

The understanding of turning the other cheek is that at least in that time and place, if a master or a soldier were to strike you it was likely to be with the back of the hand. It was a sign of superiority over you. However, if you turned the other cheek, the implication would be that the person would strike a return blow with the palm of the hand. Such an action was reserved for someone with whom you might be considered on an equal footing. Thus, to turn the other cheek, was all about taking back your dignity, letting the striker know that I am a person too. You have no right to treat me as a subservient.

Likewise, going the second mile. When you're forced to carry something for a mile by someone in power over you, something which we're told was the limit one could humanely be expected to obey, Jesus says, carry it for a second mile, out of your own free will. Again, letting the person know that the power they think they have is actually in your control. Especially when it is done in love, or in compassion. One would think that loving the enemy is really taking back control. If you love your enemy, if you treat them kindly, are they still your enemy?

This past week, I shared something on my Facebook page that I found on the Anabaptist collective: a mennonerds group page.

It's a blog by Brian Zahnd who writes "My Problem with the Bible."

My Problem With the Bible

Brian Zahnd

I have a problem with the Bible. Here's my problem...

I'm an ancient Egyptian. I'm a comfortable Babylonian. I'm a Roman in his villa.

That's my problem. See, I'm trying to read the Bible for all it's worth, but I'm not a Hebrew slave suffering in Egypt. I'm not a conquered Judean deported to Babylon. I'm not a first century Jew living under Roman occupation.

I'm a citizen of a superpower. I was born among the conquerors. I live in the empire. But I want to read the Bible and think it's talking to me. This is a problem.

One of the most remarkable things about the Bible is that in it we find the narrative told from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, the conquered, the occupied, the defeated. This is what makes it prophetic. We know that history is written by the winners. This is true — except in the case of the Bible it's the opposite! This is the subversive genius of the Hebrew prophets. They wrote from a bottom-up perspective.

Imagine a history of colonial America written by Cherokee Indians and African slaves. That would be a different way of telling the story! And that's what the Bible does. It's the story of Egypt told by the slaves. The story of Babylon told by the exiles. The story of Rome told by the occupied. What about those brief moments when Israel appeared to be on top? In those cases the prophets told Israel's story from the perspective of the peasant poor as a critique of the royal elite. Like when Amos denounced the wives of the Israelite aristocracy as "the fat cows of Bashan."

Every story is told from a vantage point; it has a bias. The bias of the Bible is from the vantage point of the underclass. But what happens if we lose sight of the prophetically subversive vantage point of the Bible? What happens if those on top read themselves into the story, not as imperial Egyptians, Babylonians, and Romans, but as the Israelites? That's when you get the bizarre phenomenon of the elite and entitled using the Bible to endorse their dominance as God's will. This is Roman Christianity after Constantine. This is Christendom on crusade. This is colonists seeing America as their promised land and the native inhabitants as Canaanites to be conquered. This is the whole history of European colonialism. This is Jim Crow. This is the American prosperity gospel. This is the domestication of Scripture. This is making the Bible dance a jig for our own amusement.

As Jesus preached the arrival of the kingdom of God he would frequently emphasize the revolutionary character of God's reign by saying things like, "the last will be first and the first last." How does Jesus' first-last aphorism strike you? I don't know about you, but it makes this modern day Roman a bit nervous.

Imagine this: A powerful charismatic figure arrives on the world scene and amasses a great following by announcing the arrival of a new arrangement of the world where those at the bottom are to be promoted and those on top are to have their lifestyle "restructured." How do people receive this? I can imagine the Bangladeshi saying, "When do we start?!" and the Americans saying, "Hold on now, let's not get carried away!"

Now think about Jesus announcing the arrival of God's kingdom with the proclamation of his counterintuitive Beatitudes. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," how was that received? Well, it depends on who is hearing it. The poor Galilean peasant

would hear it as good news (gospel), while the Roman in his villa would hear it with deep suspicion. (I know it's an anachronism, but I can imagine Claudius saying something like, "sounds like socialism to me!")

And that's the challenge I face in reading the Bible. I'm not the Galilean peasant. Who am I kidding! I'm the Roman in his villa and I need to be honest about it. I too can hear the gospel of the kingdom as good news (because it is!), but first I need to admit its radical nature and not try to tame it to endorse my inherited entitlement.

I am a (relatively) wealthy white American male. Which is fine, but it means I have to work hard at reading the Bible right. I have to see myself basically as aligned with Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Caesar. In that case, what does the Bible ask of me? Voluntary poverty? Not necessarily. But certainly the Bible calls me to deep humility — a humility demonstrated in hospitality and generosity. There's nothing necessarily wrong with being a relatively well-off white American male, but I better be humble, hospitable, and generous!

If I read the Bible with the appropriate perspective and humility I don't use the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus as a proof-text to condemn others to hell. I use it as a reminder that I'm a rich man and Lazarus lies at my door. I don't use the conquest narratives of Joshua to justify Manifest Destiny. Instead I see myself as a Rahab who needs to welcome newcomers. I don't fancy myself as Elijah calling down fire from heaven. I'm more like Nebuchadnezzar who needs to humble himself lest I go insane.

I have a problem with the Bible, but all is not lost. I just need to read it standing on my head. I need to change my perspective. If I can accept that the Bible is trying to lift up those who are unlike me, then perhaps I can read the Bible right.

In light of the standoffs shutting down our rail lines and messing with our economy, this gives a perspective on why some can say to the Indigenous peoples, "check your privilege."

But if we take Zahnd's perspective seriously, if we read the Bible from the perspective in which it was truly written, we recognize that it is we who need to check our privilege.

Sure, the blockades are disrupting getting our crops to market and hindering all sorts of other markets, but haven't we as colonizers been hindering our Indigenous peoples for the last 151 years? If they're wanting to be prophetic and ask us to listen to them, shouldn't we stop and listen?

There are other options in solving disputes than arresting people and bringing in the army. Your bulletin has a link to the Common Word site where you can download this document. Steve Heinrichs has amassed this list of links with information providing some background to the conflict. It looks like one could spend hours getting caught up, and maybe that's what we need to do.

I want to conclude this morning by telling you what happened at the SMYO retreat at the beginning of this month. Heather Driedger and I had opportunity to talk to the youth at the there

about Restorative Justice. On Saturday night, we played a game, created by MCC, called “You got booked.” It was based on the same idea as the Monopoly board game but was all about the current justice system and the prison system.

Set up in such a way that the rich white guy makes it through without a lot of difficulty, while Indigenous people and people of colour had to fight their way around the board trying to avoid prison. At the start of the game, all had one thing in common, they had no work. But some still had homes, while others did not, some had an education while others did not.

We had two games going. In the one I was leading, there was definitely a lot of complaining as a result of the struggles the majority were facing, and how the rich white guy breezed through them all. Like many people in the system, they just tried their best to deal with it, recognizing there was not much they could do to change the system.

However, in the other game, where the youth from this congregation were playing, their frustration with the system led some to find restorative ways to support one of the other characters in the game so that she would succeed and actually win the game. I don’t think there was anything detrimental done to the rich white guy, but the intervention of the others allowed her to actually do as well or perhaps even better than him and she won the game.

I was amazed at their outside the box thinking and their desire to help this person, even though it was only a game, but I hope that it will translate into real life should they ever encounter someone in a similar time of need.

We are encouraged to learn, to listen, to talk things through, to be restorative in whatever situation we might find ourselves or in whatever situation may be playing itself out in our community or our world.

God’s plan was for there to be enough for everyone, that every life matters. Let’s set aside our privilege and turn the world upside down. Amen.

Benediction:

God of light, illumine our lives that we may see rightly, love deeply and act justly in the example of Jesus. Amen.