Opinion

Guest Voices



A "Love Thy Neighbor: No Exceptions" sign is seen near the White House July 7, 2021, in Washington. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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Last Sunday (Feb. 19), in Catholic churches all over the world, the first Scripture reading was from the 19th chapter of the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Pentateuch, which describes the covenant between God and his people.

The passage argues that, to fulfill the covenant, God's people should be holy like God, and to be holy means to love your neighbor as yourself.

For the past four Sundays, Catholic parishioners have also been hearing from Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus, the new Moses, lays out the new covenant and gives his commentary on various laws from the Hebrew Scriptures.

That Sunday, Feb. 19, Jesus gave his commentary on the commandment, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

Christians usually portray this as a very harsh law. In fact, in the history of law and morality, it was a great step forward. The idea was to limit retribution. Instead of killing the person who knocked your tooth out, you could only knock his tooth out. Instead of killing an entire clan when one of its members killed a member of your tribe, you could only kill the killer.

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If this law were universally observed today, the world would be a much more peaceful place. In the Middle East, in Africa, in our own country, much more is being demanded for injuries to nations, ethnic groups or gangs than is equitable. When we feel injured, our thirst for revenge usually exceeds the injury.

As a nation, we have gone way beyond an eye for an eye. On Sept. 11, 2001, about 3,000 people were killed. Since 9/11, about half a million people have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. So, we have gone more than 100 times beyond an eye for an eye.

By the time of Jesus, rabbis felt that an eye for an eye was too harsh and began commuting the penalty to fines.

Jesus, however, goes beyond reducing the penalty to say, "When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other."

This is one of those sayings of Jesus that we admire in theory but ignore in practice. It is totally countercultural. Most of the action movies that come out of Hollywood have the theme of the good guy using violence to overcome the bad guy. We all cheer when the bad guy gets beat up or killed by the superhero.

Only a few Christian sects, such as the Mennonites, try to observe this text literally. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, took Jesus' message literally. Many others — including Christian fundamentalists who believe the story of creation in Genesis is literal — do not feel obliged to literally turn the other cheek; otherwise they would have to oppose all wars and capital punishment.

Many commentators argue that what Jesus is suggesting is that we should shame our opponent into repentance by refusing to respond with violence to violence. This was the strategy followed by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

Others — St. Augustine, for example — argued that while a Christian is required to observe this precept when he or she is attacked, the Christian has an obligation in love to come to the defense of others when they are attacked.

Augustine said that you could not use force to defend yourself from a mugger, but you could use force to defend someone else from a mugger. Augustine also taught that the people in a community could use force to defend each other, thus the origin of the just war theory.

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But some would argue that both Augustine and Gandhi missed the point. Turning the other cheek is not a political strategy. Rather, turning the cheek is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, which led to human defeat on the cross. Jesus turned the other cheek and trusted in his Father, trusted in God to raise him up from defeat and death.

No matter how you want to interpret this text, it is clear that for Jesus, the desire for revenge and retribution are an unchristian response to violence and crime. What we should want is the conversion of sinners, not their punishment.

Responding to violence with violence is an admission of defeat, not a sign of strength. Force should not be the first response to force, rather it can only be the last resort when all else fails. First, we must seek reconciliation.

This is not a popular view. Pope Francis has angered both sides of the Ukraine-Russia war by calling for negotiations and reconciliation. He wants to be a mediator, but no one wants to come to the table.



A girl looks on at a display of Russian weapon systems used in their attacks, outside St. Michael's Cathedral May 29, 2022, in Kyiv, Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Edgar Su)

Jesus continues his commentary by commenting on the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor, but hate your enemy." Actually, Jesus is wrong. There is no Old Testament injunction to hate your enemies. Leviticus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and makes no reference to enemies.

What Jesus is criticizing here is the common narrow definition of neighbor as only one's friends or countrymen. This narrow interpretation is alive and well all over the world.

Ethnic and nationalistic politics stir up hatred toward outsiders, not love and forgiveness. Racism, antisemitism, Christian nationalism, Islamophobia, homophobia, tribalism, sexism, bullying, partisanship — all are used to set people against each other.

We thrive on enemies lists; our self-identity comes from our differences in customs, language, politics and religion. We try to raise ourselves by demeaning others. We organize against "them" — those who are moving into and ruining the neighborhood. We blame "them" for job losses, diseases or other problems.

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In American politics, various enemies are presented: For the right it is Blacks, gays, Asians, Muslims, socialists, liberals, unions, feminists, woke teachers and immigrants. For the left it is the rich, fundamentalists, conservatives, the police, bankers and corporations.

Politicians promise, if elected, to protect us from these enemies. This kind of political rhetoric can lead to violence and insurrection. No one wins elections by promising to be kind to our enemies, let alone love them.

On the other hand, Jesus says, "You shall love your enemies, pray for your persecutors." Jesus asks us to expand our notion of love beyond ourselves, beyond our family, beyond our neighborhood, beyond our race or religion, beyond our nation, to encompass the whole of humanity.

It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus. Anyone who thinks it is, is simply not listening to him.

Leviticus asks us to be holy like God; Jesus asks us to love like God, who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad.

As Christians, we need to seek forgiveness for not loving our neighbors let alone our enemies, we need to praise God for his kindness and love, and we need to renew the covenant we have with God. We especially must pray that our hearts be transformed by God's spirit, a spirit of love and reconciliation.