

EPIPHANY VII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor
February 22, 1987

"BUILT INTO WHOLLY LOVERS!"

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

Leviticus 19:18

By the grace given me, I laid the foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ ... I Cor. 3:10-11

A couple of years ago it was confirmed that one of the world's largest office buildings was slowly but surely sinking. Some might suspect that it was caused by an over abundance of top heavy brass, but the real problem was caused by an insecure foundation. It was discovered that part of the Pentagon was slowly sinking into the swampy banks of the Potomac. This great military fortress built 43 years ago was now on its way down -- not visible by the eye, but ever so slowly going down with the vibrations and temperature changes of Washington D.C.

And where was the problem. It all began in the beginning. The government thought that nearly 700,000 tons of fill dirt would be sufficient for the swampy site. But even good military engineers do make mistakes -- the fill dirt had soon turned to swampy soil. Today it's estimated that an additional \$6 million is needed to shore up the Pentagon.

A good foundation is a necessary thing for any super structure in life. Whether it's the Pentagon, the Pope, or the People of God -- we all need a firm foundation.

So, what is the foundation as far as our faith is concerned? How are we built "firm and secure" as Christians? Is there anything different in our construction from others around us? What makes us unique ... holy (whole)... separate from the world ... capable of withstanding the stresses and strains of life as well as the termination of death??

Well, our texts today suggest ONE STRUCTURAL COMPONENT that makes us very different from all other sacred expressions of life ... certainly something very different from the structure of the Pentagon! Christians do not seek revenge, retaliation or the persecution of others, even their enemies!

Now how's that for a religious snow job?? Sounds pretty absurd to most of us here today, doesn't it? Let's face it -- we live in a "Rambo," "Dirty Harry," "Commando" culture -- the medium, the message today is retaliation -- strike back -- get even -- hurt anyone who in the least way gets in your way!!

The Christian foundation of "loving neighbor as self" is pure fantasy. The real world is obsessed with vindication and "victory at any cost" -- GET YOURS, BEFORE THEY GET YOU!!

In small but staggering ways we have even seen this mentality manifested in recent happenings at O-I. The KKR buyout is a graphic illustration of "victory at any cost" -- get um good while they're doing well! It's a reflection of the Get-Rich-Quick financial wizardry that has infected sports and our whole world. In talking with a former O-I executive this week, he stated, "People, products, and long-term community-productivity have been cashed in for the instant wheel of fortune. No person or no principle is sacred in this business today -- it's a dog eat dog world like I've never seen before!" Dear Christian friends, how can we talk against immorality and greed when we merely say "ho hum" to a corporate leverager that pays itself a \$60 million dollar fee for raping a company and community?? I think it's time for American stockholders to look at the long-term consequences of their bullishness for quick & easy profits.

Forgive me for my anger. But it is always the church of Jesus Christ that has to mop up the bloody aftermath of our world's battles -- whether it's military strife or commercial warfare. Everyone looks for instant relief from God ... or blames God for the vengeance of the world's greed and gore. It is the church, and other community institutions, that stand by innocently taking the fallout of the world's hostility. As you can see, I'm doing the very thing that Jesus Christ urges me not to do in today's texts: DO NOT SEEK REVENGE, DO NO RETALIATE! I'm retaliating against a power structure that appears to be making an unjust attack on the secure foundations of this community!!

You see -- it is so difficult to live out the foundation of the Christian faith - THE LOVE OF GOD. Whenever my security base is eroded, I tend to come out with my fists clenched -- I strike back, I retaliate, I try to get even with those bad guys in New York!!

That was so graphically illustrated in a recent episode of Hill Street Blues. Mr. Poppovich, a widower, had lived in a good Polish neighborhood for years. He kept his yard mowed, his hedges trimmed, and his house spic and span. But around him everything was changing. Blacks and Hispanics were moving into the area -- the kids were trampling his marigolds and using a corner of his back yard for their soccer games. He had warned them once "that he would shoot to kill;" this day he came out with his shotgun and fired one fatal blow to a teenager. Within hours, his home was under seige by the neighborhood.

Officers Hill and Renko were dispatched. They needed assistance from Lt. Henry Goldblum, an ethnic Jew. With one ethnic pleading with another, Lt. Goldblum finally negotiated

a truce, and was allowed into the house. He listened to old Poppovich tell his tale: "This used to be nice neighborhood. I could send my daughter day or night to the store for milk. There used to be a Polish bakery on that corner that sold still-warm bread. Now you go to the supermarket and you pay two bucks for chemical garbage. Niggers and Spicks have destroyed my good neighborhood. There's garbage all over the place -- they even urinate in their front doorways. Garbage -- that's all that's left anymore! So why should I give a damn when nobody else does?!?"

Which one of us hasn't heard Mr Poppovich's story before? We all have known his frustration with change. When our security and safety is threatened, we retaliate ... we strike back ... we get even ... we kill the other guy because he no longer has worth in our eyes ... he has threatened our security! We strike back because we often make the facade of life into our real foundation of security.

For Mr. Poppovich, the neat neighborhood facade -- its cleanness, its well trimmed look, its whiteness, its Polishness -- this facade had been made into his firm foundation. But facades never stay -- they always fade away.

That is appropriately illustrated by this beautiful sanctuary. This is not the real temple of the Lord ... it is not the foundation of our faith. That's why Pastor Bob and I often become annoyed with non-member couples who just want a pretty place to be married! They have made the facade of the church into their foundation of fidelity. They are not "holy" or "wholly" lovers -- they are surface sweethearts -- not wholistic in their love of life. They make outward things into the essence of inner relationships. That is never the foundation of Christian faith or marriage!

The foundation is expressed today by Moses, Jesus and Paul: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against your neighbor, but love your neighbor as yourself." "Love of self ... and love of neighbor" are the foundation of our unsinkable faith! Because this is the firm foundation of God's love!

Let's look more carefully at what this means -- we've heard it so often that maybe it no longer has any deep meaning for us. One of the greatest failures of the church (and even some of my preaching) is that we do not say clearly and categorically: "YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO LOVE YOURSELF!" That's exactly what God said when he created us: "I love you - it is good; now love yourselves as I have loved you!"

Too often the church has said: "Beat your breasts" if you think highly of yourself. Get down and repent for any self love. Don't you dare ever do anything that would make you feel good about yourself. Look grim, feel dismal, distort yourself -- for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

How tragic that the church has communicated this "hate yourself" mentality! God says over and over and over again in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The first order of love is to "LOVE YOURSELF" - MAKE CERTAIN THAT YOU CARE FOR YOUR HEALTH, WEALTH, AND WELL-BEING! Be sure that you do everything possible to insure your own physical and emotional well-being and that of your family, for this is the goodness of creation. Love your own life first, because God has given it to you!! It is one of God's most valuable possessions; in fact, it is the temple of the Lord.

That's why we are so committed to excellent health care in this land. And that's also why we take time off from the pressures and stresses of our work -- because our bodies and minds need relief, relaxation, and renewal! We "vacation" because we "love ourselves" -- we respect the life that God has given us. We show God that we do not want to "stress out" what he has so lovingly given; moreover, we do not inflict our bodies or minds with anything that would intentionally cause us death or destruction.

Yes, the first foundation of Christian love is TO LOVE OURSELVES ... BECAUSE GOD FIRST LOVED US IN GIVING US LIFE!! In so loving ourselves, we recognize how deeply precious life really is -- but not only our lives, all lives ... all other neighbors who are like us!! By loving ourselves we have reached the first rung of God's Ladder of Love. Now he says, since you know the love of self, go to the top and love others like Christ!

Yes, once we have seen the ultimate value of "loving ourselves" - then there is absolutely nothing that blocks us from seeing our neighbor "as our-self" -- just as we see ourselves. We see that his life is just like ours -- that he treasures what we treasure and is threatened by the same things that threaten us.

Therefore, much as we wouldn't do anything to damage our own life, likewise, we wouldn't do anything to damage or destroy our neighbor's life or well being! Even though we may not like the way he wraps his garbage or mows his lawn, we wouldn't take a shot gun to show him our displeasure of his presence!! And certainly we would never rape the profits from our neighbor's corporation, because that would hurt our neighbor ... that would possibly destroy his employment ... that would kill his family ... that would ruin his future! And since we wouldn't want "ourselves" to be hurt that way, how could we tolerate someone else raping our neighbor that way?? That is not the way "Wholly lovers" are built -- because "holy lovers" build their love of others on exactly the same foundation as love of self. Why would we walk a second mile for a neighbor?? Because we would walk a second mile for our-selves! Why would we not unfairly sue our neighbor? Because we would never unfairly sue our-selves!!

Why would we give a cloak off our back to a neighbor? Because we would do the same for ourselves if hungry or cold! Because that's the foundation of our Christian faith -- it's built upon God's love of his selves ... its' built upon "Wholly Lovers" -- people who love others just as they love themselves!!

In fact, that's the very nature of the love of Jesus Christ! He knew how much God loved him, and that's why he loved like God -- out of the love he had received for himself!! And since he would sacrifice for himself, he certainly would sacrifice without question for others! Jesus Christ knew the foundation of love went beyond himself ... beyond the first rung of the Ladder of Love. He went to the top of the Ladder of Love -- "he loved others as he loved himself!" You and I have been built into that same wholistic model of love -- it is the model of God's love of us! And with that firm foundation in Jesus Christ, we would never seek revenge or bear a grudge ... would we?? FOR WE WOULD NEVER LOVE OURSELVES IN THAT WAY!!

AND AFTER ALL, WE ARE BUILT INTO WHOLLY (that is wholistic) LOVERS -- WE LOVE OTHERS JUST AS WE LOVE OURSELVES!!

AMEN .

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We do not
walk by
ourselves --
we walk more
closely with
Christ --
that means

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"GOING BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE"

(And Jesus said) "Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much (or more) again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, and expect nothing in return. ... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Luke 6:31-36

As most of you know, pastors are often asked to officiate for funerals of unknown persons or those without church membership. As steward's of God's grace, we try to be compassionate servants for these people. But almost without exception, when I first talk to families of such persons they will say to me: "I want you to know, Pastor, that Joe/Mary/Jon lived by the Golden Rule." These families are obviously trying to impress upon me that the deceased was a "good person."

I always smile and assure the family that I am grateful that their loved one was a good person. Yet, sometimes I wish **I could be as honest as I want to be at that moment:** the facts are - Golden Rule Christianity is a very inferior form of faith in God and His Way & Truth! It is good, it is biblical, but it is inferior. Because Golden-Rule-Religion is not based upon what God has done, but what we can do for each other. Golden-Rule-Religion says, "I will **give you this** if you will assure me of that!" G-R-R lives by the mandate that "I **will love you** your way if you will love me my way; I **will lend** to you if you will lend to me with equal or greater interest; I will **do a favor** for you if you will return the favor for me." Golden-Rule-Religion, instead of being motivated by God and his example, manuevers and manipulates to get "what is advantageous for me from others."

For that reason, Jesus says in Luke: *"If you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you lend to only those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much or expect more in interest."* The question posed by today's texts is: **What stimulates you and me to be faithful?** Is our faithfulness motivated by reward or credit ... or is faith motivated by the sheer goodness of God's gracious example to us?

Let me bring this into the realm of reality with an illustration of congregational life here at Hope. Some of our members make phone calls or mail notes to other members. Earlier this week, one of those servants called Norma to confirm names/addresses for mailing. During the conversation, Norma asked the member to stop by the office in order to get "reimbursed" for the stamps that she was using. The member responded: "How can I say I am faithful to Christ when I am more concerned about reimbursement for a couple of 32 cent stamps? Is that the worth of Christ's life and death to me? Do I have to get credit for every penny that I spend on his behalf!?" This person

went on, "How tragic, Norma, that Christians in our world today only give to get credit or a tax-write-off! How can they be so insulting to God and so stingy in their faith?!" Now there was a Christian who spoke from the heart rather than from her own self-interest! How wonderful it would be if all of us possessed that faith and spirit. For here was a person **who gives without worrying about getting back** because that's the nature of those who have been baptized into Christ!

Maybe another story from the early church helps clarify the matter. As you all know, early Christians gathered in house congregations. Unlike this sanctuary, in those houses there was constant fear that any moment the authorized police would raid those meeting places and persecute the people. One story is told of such a house church. When the soldiers forced entry, they demanded that all persons present renounce their faith. In return, those who spoke against God would be allowed to leave and live. Three persons quickly denied their faith in God and left. Then three more; then two more. Finally just five remained standing at the wall making it clear they were ready to die for their faith!

The soldiers glanced nervously at each other and then put down their weapons and began hugging those five Christians saying, "Peace be with you!" The lead soldier told these stunned believers that he and his partner were converted Christians. But he continued: "We can only share our true feelings with those who are willing to die for their faith -- for the ones who left earlier cannot be trusted ... they were not willing to die for their faith!" **Or put into today's context - they were Golden-Rule-Believers: they were only faithful as long as the wind was blowing in a favorable direction.** They only loved God when others made clear that it was popular, safe & acceptable to love God. Contrary to such faithfulness, those who "Go Beyond the Golden Rule" are people who are not conditioned by what others say or do, **but by what God has already said and done.** And God has said: **"He/she who loses his life for my sake will truly find it!"** Yes, God has said, Golden-Rule-Religion is good - it is o.k.; but being "merciful as I am merciful ... sacrificing as I have sacrificed IS EVEN BETTER!!!"

The soldiers that invaded that early church wanted to see who were the real "followers" of Christ. They were looking for those devout Christians who would go beyond the Golden Rule -- the ones who would not only "commit" because the climate was the right temperature. They needed to find Christians who would really live sacrificially when the heat was on -- even in the midst of their enemies when they could expect nothing in return.

I hope by now it is clear that you and I belong to such a body of believers, where the ethic of sacrifice is VERY LOFTY ... in fact, it's an impossible human standard. But God does not lower his standards just to make everyone feel comfortable. The Christian ethic is not motivated by prudence, or self-interest, or what's fair, or what feels good, **BUT BY GOD'S FAITHFUL EXAMPLE OF SACRIFICE.** It wasn't fair or prudent for God's Son to die for a vengeful and immoral mob, but God knew that was the

only way that people would understand the meaning of real love: by showing that He himself had **gone beyond the golden rule!** So it is that God has always sets his standard high, because he does not want his followers coming to the end of their lives **bragging about how good they have lived the Golden Rule.** God has shown us a BETTER WAY than the human desire for credit thru the Golden Rules. He has shown us **the Way, the Truth and the Life of total sacrifice in Jesus Christ!** So, the goodness at the end of our lives is not a credit to ourselves but a credit to our Creator -- to the one who has shown us the ultimate meaning of goodness and grace in the first place.

And the OT lesson today gives us that graphic, down-to-earth example of GOING BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE. As we all remember, Joseph was a pampered child of aging parents. A more obnoxious little brother would have been hard to find! Not only did he have the finest wardrobe, he even pranced before his brothers in a special robe given to him by dad. In short, he would be called an egotistical little brat today, who always seemed to have things going his way. That was until his brothers decided to sell him into slavery rather than kill him.

His life in Egypt was filled with years of ups and downs. But those years in Egypt had at least taught him to die to self and surrender to God's control. Ultimately, he rose to a very important position in service to the Pharaoh. It was at that time that his brothers reappeared, driven from Canaan by drought and tough times. Had Joseph adopted a Golden-Rule mentality at that time, his reunion with his brothers would have been an opportune time for revenge and retaliation: "Do unto them as they have done unto me!" But Joseph had known the realities of helplessness and desperate need for God's help. Even though his brothers had been his enemies ... even though he deeply resented their sinful act of selling him into slavery ... even though they deserved a taste of their own medicine ... yet he knew he had to sacrifice retaliation & revenge, and offer mercy and forgiveness: **because that was the Way of God.** And likewise, it was the only Way of hope for his brothers ... and for reconciliation in his family. He reached out in gracious love rather than in rage & judgment on those who had persecuted him. His life and faithfulness was a model of true Godliness - of GOING BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE.

What will your family or mine say about us when we have reached the end of our lives? Will we be known as one of those many folks who only lived by a Golden-Rule-Religion: only loving those who loved us, only doing good to those who did the same for us, only lending to those who could promise us an equal or greater return? Or will we be known for our belief in that Way, that Truth, and that Life of ultimate sacrifice ... as followers of Christ who was willing to forgive the sinner even though he hated the sin ... who was willing to die for the unloveable because that is the grace of God? Yes, will we, like our Lord, be Christians for whom it will be said: he/she lived GOING BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE?!

AMEN.