

The Heart of the Matter

sermon digest

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Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-10, 11-18; Matthew 22:35-40

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I fully believe today is a first. I don't think I have ever preached a sermon from the book of Leviticus. I would hang my head in shame if it were not for the fact that most other preachers I know occupy the same boat. At most, those preachers who follow the lectionary, the suggested texts that ministers follow on a three year rotation schedule, will turn to Leviticus once or maybe twice over a three year period. Leviticus is among the least visited books of the Bible, maybe because of the seemingly scattered, disorganized way it proceeds, maybe because of its lengthy treatment of obscure cultic practices that make little sense to us, or maybe because we associate its many directives with a legalism we don't care to engage. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," Leviticus 19:2 insists. We speak of the command and all of the instructions that follow as the "holiness code". Maybe we shy away from the book because we have seen so called holiness paraded as judgmental, unloving self-righteousness; and we don't want any part of it. "Better," we tell ourselves, "that we stick to the New Testament. Better that we focus on love, not law."

But ask yourself, is it better that we remain unfamiliar with the faith tradition of none other than Jesus himself? Is it better that we not go to the trouble of thoroughly acquainting ourselves with his sermon texts so that we can better understand what he was saying? Is it better that we rip the jewel, "love your neighbor as yourself," out of the context from which he took it as if his faith and our faith have nothing to do with the rich tradition that brought him to birth? Is it better that we distance ourselves from cousins with whom we share so much and against whom so much misunderstanding and prejudice have been directed over the centuries? Is it better that we risk slipping into a syrupy, comfortable, sentimental expression of the Christian faith that focuses upon good feelings and kind intentions—a faith divorced from the radical call to obedience sounded throughout the life and teachings of the one we call "Lord"?

The significance of Leviticus 19, our text for today, cannot be overstated for the Jewish or the Christian faith. For Reform Judaism, perhaps the form of Judaism with which we are most familiar, it is one of the most quoted passages of scripture and one of the most often read. It is the prescribed afternoon reading for Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Its twin commandments: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" are turning points for Israel's faith, for Jesus' faith and thus for our faith. Rooted in the often repeated refrain "I am the Lord," these central teachings spring from the fundamental faith principle of who God is and therefore who God's people should be. Sung sixteen times in spelling out what it means to be holy as God is holy, the refrain "I am the Lord your God" is, James Mead suggests, scattered freely throughout the text, as "precious stones or ornaments might be scattered throughout the tabernacle to indicate the holiness of the place" [Workingpreacher.org, October 23, 2011]. Repeated in conjunction with every command, every piece of instruction for the responsibilities and actions of God's people, "I am the Lord your God" trumpets: "You want to know what you should do? You want to know who you should be? Look at who God is." If we want to get to the heart of the Jewish faith, if we want to get to the heart of the Christian faith, this is it.

The motivation and the model for biblical holiness is the nature and action of God. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" constitutes the first "word" of the "Ten Words" or the Decalogue in Exodus. Jewish tradition begins counting the commandments with these words. Every injunction in the Ten Commandments flows from this foundational affirmation. Leviticus 19 commands, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Israel's ethic, like the Christian ethic, is rooted in who God is. The entirety of Israel's ethical system, you might say, is a gigantic THEREFORE. "This is who I am" scripture proclaims. "Therefore, this is who you should be." We might take it all for granted if we did not know what a unique statement it was for the time and context out of which it emerged. No other Near Eastern text approximates it. Rooting ethical motivation in the character and deliverance of God is, James Muilenburg says, "distinctively Israelite" [The Way of Israel, 67]. Compared to the capricious, sensual and even decadent nature of other Near Eastern gods, Israel's ethical, gracious God stands apart.

And notice who is addressed. "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying 'Speak to all the congregation of

the people of Israel.” The words are not merely for the priests or the judges or some other official; they are directed to the people themselves. “They are democratic in intent,” Muilenburg insists. The “you shalls” and “you shall nots” are for the hearing *and* the understanding of every single member of the community, not for a few religious elites. Unlike other codes of the day, Israel’s ethical injunctions give reasons. They are rooted in the nature and gracious action of God, who saw a people in captivity and acted for their deliverance. The call to holiness and obedience is not about a petty despot. They are not about power for power’s sake. They are about a God who has taken the initiative and come in delivering love. They are about relationship. They are about spelling out the practical implications involved in serving and walking alongside such a god. They are about extending the effects of what God has done for them into the future in their relationships with one another and with others who share a plight similar to their own. They are not about hard, cold legalism. They are about a gracious people serving a gracious God. They are about living from the heart. They are about “the self at its deepest center” [M. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, 108].

Holiness modeled upon the nature and action of God manifests itself in love of neighbor. Be sure then, that no matter the bad experiences we may have had with self-proclaimed holy or righteous people, a life modeled upon the nature and action of God is not self-righteous or judgmental. True, the call in Leviticus to holiness can be interpreted in such a way as to close off the world lest it defile true believers. It can be interpreted in such a way that the faithful spend their energies in drawing a bright line in the sand between “them” and “us”, between “those other people” and “our kind.” Despicable tyrants on the order of white supremacist Matthew Hale can grab hold of scripture, interpreting it to say that whatever benefits the white race is good and whatever is against the white race is evil. “That,” he pontificates, “is the Golden Rule.”

Appropriately, the call in Leviticus 19 to be holy is paired with “love your neighbor as yourself.” See in your neighbor, in other words, a likeness to yourself, also made in the image of God. Leviticus’ call to holiness is not “to swivel the mini-blinds” of our lives “shut [to the world], but to throw them open to God” [Bruce Modahl. *Christian Century*, O 13, 1999]. Although the call is that we should seek to live from the center of our lives toward God and not to get lost in a thousand other loyalties, it is also about our neighbor. It is about living in such a fashion that the world around us gets a glimpse of what God is like. It is about pointing, in the words of Bruce Modahl, “to a God whose justice is ruled by love, who makes provision for the poor and will not allow the disabled to be disadvantaged.” It is about honest scales, refraining from slander, being truthful, protecting the disadvantaged. It is about the neighbor who is like us, but it is also about the neighbor who is different from us. “You shall love the alien as yourself,” Leviticus 19:34 commands, “for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

We met Emerson Powery, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from West India in the 1970’s, at an I.C.C.C. conference in Nashville about five years ago. A graduate of Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, and Princeton and Duke, his first teaching job upon completing his Ph.D. was at his alma mater in Cleveland. He relates an intriguing story from 1861. The first slave narrative to be published by an African American female author, Harriet Jacobs’ “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”, recalls the death of her mistress and waiting with baited breath to learn if her mistress had, as promised, granted her freedom upon her death.

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister’s daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I supposed she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong.[*J Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*, II, p. 546; quoted in *Interpretation*, April 2008]

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” “love the alien as yourself,” Leviticus tells us. The love to which we are compelled is not slushy emotionalism. It is not merely kind feelings. It is the basic stuff, the practical day-to-day actions that constitute our lives. It is not “affection but commitment.”

Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that Deuteronomy 6:5 demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering

commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously —Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 260.

So what does God's call to holiness and love of neighbor mean to us? For some, it means trying to plant the Ten Commandments on front lawns and in public buildings, as if doing so will order in a more moral community. More appropriately and more importantly, however, is the concern to reclaim the "royal law" of loving our neighbor and re-emphasizing the Levitical command to love the alien as being like ourselves, deserving and in need of help. "This type of behavior," Powery suggests, "really is the heart of the matter."

The treatment of the neighbor says more about one's theological commitments than any ecclesial confession. Indeed, how one defines the neighbor, that is, how one determines who is one's neighbor, reveals the kind of God in whom one believes.

So, who is your God? What kind of God does our neighbor across the street, across town, at work, in the alleyways and hedges of our cities, and in famine struck Africa see? "I am the Lord your God," the God of Israel and Jesus says to us. "Go and live according to the grace and mercy you have received."