

Lev 10:10-11, 11:44-45

Romans 1 to 2:4

A Sermon preached at Southminster by Marci Auld Glass

July 19, 2009

I'm sure a few of you are reconsidering this "Year of the Bible" plan now that we are deep into Leviticus and Romans. I am sure you didn't expect such nice, light, summer "beach" reading for July.

But here we are.

Let's start with Leviticus, shall we?

Leviticus gets its name from the Levitical priests who used it as a manual to help them in their worship plans, among other things. It is a book about worship. And about holiness.

If you've been reading along in the Year of the Bible, you might be thinking, "I've been in the wrong book". Because, to our ears, it seems like a book of rules. Of who is in and who is out. Of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

But it was written by people who were trying to figure out how to set themselves apart from the cultures around them. When you are a small minority, it makes sense that cultural identity, practices, and beliefs would matter.

God had called the Israelites to be God's own people, set apart. But it is hard to do. It is hard to be set apart. It is easier to go along with your friends at school, or your co-workers. It is easier to be seduced by Madison Avenue's advertising, telling you to go along with the crowd.

Go ahead, eat that shellfish like the coastal Phoenicians do. I'm sure that they were transported from the Mediterranean in refrigerated 18 wheeled camels and there is no chance that you could get sick and die.

Go ahead, marry that sexy Canaanite woman. When you have children, I'm sure she'll agree with you that they should worship the One true God and not worship her gods.

Go ahead and let that person with the funky skin rash come to your dinner party. Even though leprosy is terribly contagious, I'm sure that what they have is something else. You'll be fine.

These rules and guidelines were for the benefit of the community. For the welfare of the community. For the shalom, the wholeness, the health, of the community.

The section we read from this morning is from the Holiness Code. And the authors of Leviticus have a different idea about how one becomes holy than will some of the other Biblical writers. When we get to Deuteronomy, pay attention to how holiness is dispensed. I'll give you a clue. In Deuteronomy, our holiness is connected to the Covenant, to being chosen by God. Sanctification, or "being made holy" is the beginning of the journey in Deuteronomy. God brings us into the covenant and we begin our lives as "set apart" people.

In Leviticus, however, holiness occurs as an instruction, a command. "For I am the Lord your God. Sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy." Leviticus has a "trickle down model" of holiness. God is HOLY. God's priests are set apart from the people to mediate that holiness down to the people. Sanctification doesn't happen at the beginning of the faith journey, but is its goal. If you live a life of obedience to God's commands, holiness is the outcome.

The understandings of holiness could not be more different. And both of them are scripture.

Jesus draws upon them both. Listen to this passage from Luke's gospel: Now an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you understand it?" The expert answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

The answer given to Jesus consists of a quote from Deuteronomy and a quote from Leviticus. And Jesus tells him he has answered well.

The question the religious expert goes on to ask should be one we ask as well. "But who is my neighbor?"

For the writers of Leviticus, your neighbor was the Israelite man who lived next to you and who submitted himself to the Law and the Holiness Codes. There were expectations of hospitality and welcome for the stranger, but strangers were not neighbors in Leviticus.

Who is my neighbor?

Paul isn't answering that question, exactly, but in the first chapter of Romans, he's setting up an argument that runs throughout the letter. In

his greeting, he makes clear that the gospel is the power of salvation for those who have faith. And you can tell that Paul, the Pharisee, is very familiar with Leviticus. Listen to this language from verse 7: To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He's not calling them to go be Mother Teresa. Saints is Paul's word for God's family. We are all saints.

But, for Paul, that call to holiness, to be saints, cannot be separated from grace. Listen to verse 7 again: To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is trying to get his readers to understand that the Gospel of Jesus Christ RADICALLY changes how we understand our relationship with God. As we read through Romans in the Year of the Bible, pay attention to how this argument builds.

For Paul, here a few things to keep in mind:

God is God of every person and of all creation. There is only one God. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has made a saving claim over all humanity. And the way for us to respond to that claim God is making on our lives is through belief in Jesus Christ. (Thanks to David Bartlett in his commentary on Romans, p. 4).

In this first chapter, he brings his readers in to his confidence by rattling off a list of bad behaviors, illustrating how humanity has fallen away from who God has called us to be. We have suppressed God's truth. We have not honored God or been thankful. We have exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

He then describes some of those behaviors that the society would have easily called sinful. Today, he might say, "they gave corporate bonuses to companies that were bankrupt! They gave other people's money to Bernie Madoff! They murdered puppies!"

The crowd would have been going wild!

"Those horrible people!"

"How could they?"

"SINNERS!"

But then, Paul pulls the rug out from under them.

“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”

BAM!

Paul, who was so familiar with the Holiness Codes recognized that they were being used only to divide, only to separate. They had gone from being about wholeness and shalom to being about who is in and who is out.

Who is my neighbor?

The truth of God that Paul experienced in Jesus Christ is that God’s love is meant to be poured out on all. That there is no dividing wall between us anymore. That in Christ there is no East and West. Hear Paul’s words: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith”. (1:16-17)

Who is my neighbor?

You are. And you are. And he is. And she is. And they are.

Yet Leviticus is still being used to divide. To separate. To declare that some of us are holier than others. A very few passages in Leviticus and, ironically, this passage I just read in Romans are still used by Christians to keep our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters from full participation in the life of the church.

I am not going into the details about all of these texts right now, but there will be an adult ed class beginning in September, where we will look at these (and other) texts and have a chance to have conversation about this very personal and important issue.

But, for the purposes of these texts this morning, let me make some observations. There are plenty of things in the Levitical codes that Christians of all varieties ignore completely. Leviticus says we shouldn’t mix fabrics (19:19), so I hope none of you are wearing any polyester/cotton blends. Lobster is forbidden. Men, you can’t trim your

beards at the edges (19:27). And we shouldn't ordain anyone who has any physical flaw, including bad eyesight, a limp, or any deformity. (21:17-23) Did you know, that according to Leviticus 20:9, 'If anyone curses his father and mother he must be put to death.'

And, needless to say, you shouldn't have called a woman to be your pastor, because that is unfathomable.

All of these restrictions served a purpose when they were created. As I said, they were supposed to help the community come together. But we have, rightly, let them go as they no longer match the world in which we live.

Really, according to Romans, they weren't even working in Paul's day. Because seeking holiness by making lists of who is in and who is out subverts the intention of the Holiness Codes. And it is an attempt to invalidate God's grace. When we start declaring who is in and who is out, Paul would say to us, "you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

Who are our neighbors?

And how do we live as saints with our neighbors?

Because the fact is, that as people who have received salvation by God through grace, we should be living differently. When you have received this gift that has freed you from the holiness and purity codes of either Leviticus or of our society, you are thankful. You are freed to love and serve. You are empowered to speak up for justice when people try to limit and control God's love.

Friends, we are holy. We are saints, people who have been loved into salvation through a completely unmerited and undeserved gift from the Creator. May our lives show and share that kind of holiness with the world. Amen.

