

Bible Study
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
February 19, 2017

[RCL] Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Leviticus: not the most popular book of scripture among many Christians. How does one read text that does not contain a discernible story with engaging characters, but only seemingly arcane rituals and laws that have no apparent relevance in twenty-first century Western Christian culture? We do not practice them or even believe in their validity for the most part. How can we relate?

Would you read it if it were a life-or-death situation? Scholars such as Robert Alter, Jacob Milgrom and Everett Fox, in their commentaries on Leviticus, all seem to suggest that this central portion of Torah describes a life-or-death situation for the Israelites, their place in the cosmos and their relationship with God. The instructions, both for priests and for lay Israelites, are meant, these scholars suggest, to enable God's chosen people to attain holiness and set aside impurity by embracing the values found, for example, in today's reading: caring for the poor and the "sojourner" (both Alter and Fox use this word rather than "alien"); not taking advantage of your neighbor; and generally, not being morally complicit with sin.

- How might this reading affect your understanding of holiness? Is holiness related to morality?
- Take some time to re-read these verses, but include the omitted ones, 3-8. Are Christian rituals reflective of our values? If so, how?
- Is our understanding of holiness different in twenty-first century Christianity than in the writings of seventh-century-B.C. Judaism? How?
- How might we see love in these verses? How is holiness related to love?

Psalm 119:33-40

"Teach me."

"Give me."

"Make me."

Best of all: "Incline my heart."

Perhaps surrendering to God's action upon us, as suggested by the syntax of the psalmist's words, is what sets our hearts free.

- What might it mean in your life to surrender to God?
- How might you ask God to work upon you?

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Consider the character of Nick Bottom, from Shakespeare's comedy, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Bottom is a comic figure, a "rude tradesman," who is often portrayed as what we would now term "socially awkward," comparable to Sheldon from the TV show "The Big Bang Theory," but less of an academic snob. The group of rude tradesmen whom Bottom leads are attempting to put on a play for a

duke's wedding. Shakespeare's comedy contrasts the actions of the aristocrats with those of the lower class. During the course of the play, an impish fairy, Puck, changes Bottom's human head into that of an ass because Bottom is such a laughable leader of the group of "actors." In one scene, after his romantic encounter with the fairy queen, Titania, he shamelessly (mis)quotes the apostle from a different part of 1 Corinthians (2:9) as he attempts to understand his experience:

"I have had a dream, past the wit of man to
say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go
about to expound this dream. Methought I was – there
is no man can tell what. Methought I was, – and
methought I had, – but man is but a patched fool, if
he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye
of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not
seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue
to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was."

— William Shakespeare, "[A Midsummer Night's Dream](#)," lines 1767-1776

- How might Bottom's speech be related to Paul's words in today's reading: "If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."
- How does today's text affect your understanding of leadership, whether in a religious or a secular setting?

Matthew 5:38-48

Coercion. Oppression. Submission. Resistance. What do these words mean to you? Do you visualize a Hollywood action movie, where the bad guys attempt to coerce the good guys into submission via physical violence, and then the good guys win out by means of armed resistance? Often the directors of these films appear to exalt gunfire, punching and bombing as the means of overcoming the enemy. Both sides use extreme violence to achieve their respective ends. If this is what you visualize, you are obviously not alone. And neither is twenty-first century Western culture. Many in Jesus' time expected just this of him – armed resistance of the Roman oppressors.

Or do you picture Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., when hearing these words? Do you view turning the other cheek to your enemies as a loss or a surrendering of your power? As a sign of weakness?

David E. Garland, in his book, "Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary" (Smith & Helwys, 2001) reminds his readers that to turn the other cheek affords one power over the "enemy" or the oppressor, because, essentially, you are putting the ball back in that person's court. He or she must then choose whether to offer more violence. For example, the Roman soldier then becomes the one who must choose how to respond when the person who has been compelled to carry a heavy pack willingly submits to going one more mile; the people on the bus are the ones who must choose to force a black woman from her seat.

- How would our lives be different if Martin Luther King, Jr., had led his followers into armed resistance?

- How would the story of Christianity be different today if Jesus had led an armed uprising against the Roman Empire?
- How can your life be different if you strive to be perfect in love of neighbor and enemy, as Jesus asks of us in today's lesson?

Written by Christine Havens. This Bible Study was originally posted in February 2014.

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