
Holy Love

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25, Year A

Oh boy, we get to hear a lesson from Leviticus today! Oh no, we get to hear a lesson from Leviticus today!

Ugh. Those of you who have heard me teach in bible studies here, or who have heard me in sermons, or who maybe who have heard me at some cocktail party or reception: y'all have heard me say bad things about the Book of Leviticus. I do not like the Book of Leviticus. I find it full of tedious dietary restrictions, and weird holiness codes. It sounds like my scolding second grade school teacher. And when people insist on taking the Book of Leviticus literally and strictly, the book becomes even worse.

So, in all honesty and good will, when the Book of Leviticus does happen to say something worthwhile, I have to acknowledge it. Let the record show that the Book of Leviticus says something worthwhile today. In fact, it uses two words that can change our lives.

But let's start with Jesus. Let's get to Leviticus through Jesus. Let's see how Jesus interprets scripture. I think Jesus uses his head when he interprets scripture. He uses his head. The story in our gospel today is set just after Jesus himself had encountered severe legalistic opposition. We heard them in our recent Sunday gospel readings. Is it lawful to pay taxes or not? Will there be re-marriage in heaven?

And now this one: Which is the greatest commandment in the law? No matter what Jesus says, he knows that the Pharisees plan to accuse him of omitting something important. Jesus answers in two ways: by re-interpreting scripture, and by giving the answer of love. He uses his head, and he uses his heart.

Listen to Jesus' answer. First of all, when asked which commandments are the greatest, he does not give the limp and lame answer that, "oh, my, they are all equally valid." No, he acknowledges, some verses are more authoritative than others!

Nor does he reply with something like: "whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death," even though that is certainly scriptural. That is in the bible! Rather he searched, with all his heart and soul *and mind*, for that commandment which summed up the theme of all the rest --that commandment which all the rest were designed to support.

He delivers a direct quotation from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the *Shema* of Israel, that which every good Jew recited daily in prayer: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

But, wait a second! Is that the same quotation which Jesus used? Deuteronomy 6 literally says "love God...with all your *might*." Jesus said, "love God...with all your *mind*." Something has changed. What's the difference? On one level, there's not much difference; we are to love God with all that we are. But to say specifically, "love God...with all your *mind*" means something in particular. I think it means, "Use your head! Figure it out." Loving God requires some thinking. Love is more than just sentiment, religious feeling, good will (though those, too, are good).

Good love involves good thinking, and thinking can be difficult and scary. It might even point us to contradiction and paradox. We might even notice them in Scripture. And it is a good thing to notice paradoxes in scripture. We know then that we are on the right track, for paradox is especially the enemy of fundamentalism, which wants all truth to be rigid and consistent and narrow. Paradox opens the way to mystery, and mystery is the

enemy of fundamentalism.

So it is that Jesus poses a paradox to his accusers in today's gospel: "If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" That paradoxical question silences his attackers.

Paradox is also the stuff of creativity. It was the great 19th century Dane, Soren Kierkegaard who said, "The thinker who is devoid of paradox is like the lover who is devoid of passion."

Jesus knew how to love, and he knew how to think. He said, "Love God with your mind." His very statement is a re-interpretation of Deuteronomy 6. It is not an exact quotation, delivered mindlessly and blindly. Jesus was not a fundamentalist, not a simplistic legalist, not a shallow thinker.

Jesus thus gives the answer to rigid and simplistic interpreters of Scripture. Find your heart, find your soul, find your mind. Then use them to love God and neighbor. Jesus is able to transform a lawyer's meticulous testing into an all-encompassing love command of God.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and prophets."

If we are looking for *simplicity* in our Christian theology, here it is, summed up in power and authority:

"Love God: love your neighbor."

Well, the "love God" part of Jesus' answer is from Deuteronomy, but the "love your neighbor" part of Jesus' answer is from another book of the Bible. In fact, it is from Leviticus. Oh no! The very book which gets interpreted so crazily and literally, the very book that I don't like!

Leviticus! It is the Book of Leviticus which gives us the commandment to love our neighbor as ourself.

Well, love is love, no matter where it comes from and who said it. Love, that feature of humanity (and divinity!) that gets explained in so many ways. As most of us know, the ancient Greeks had all sorts of words for love: agape, which is self-giving love; phileo, which is brotherly and sisterly love; eros, which is—well—erotic love. Plato considered love a kind of madness. Duke Ellington was fond of saying, "I love you madly!"

They are all love, and we experience so many forms of love throughout our lives. I pray that every single one of us knows love in all those sorts of ways. All the forms of love are life-giving. Love is what gives us life.

But, strangely enough, Leviticus also gives us another word to associate with love. As much as I hate to admit it, I have to grudgingly admit that the Book of Leviticus offers us another beautiful and incredibly powerful word to associate with love.

It is the word, "holy." Right before this verse to love our neighbor as ourself, Leviticus describes God saying, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD am holy." Then, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."

What if love, the ultimate love of God is even more than agape, phileo, eros? What if love is actually holy? You shall be holy, says, the Lord; love your neighbor as yourself.

I have long been fascinated by a special tension in religion, a polar tension. There is a polar tension in Christianity. On the one hand, many folks are drawn to Christianity because it provides some sense of order and structure in our lives. Deep down, we want to be connected to something permanent and long-lasting. We want order in our lives. We want an anchor. We want stability and structure.

Religion has long provided this structure and foundation. The very word "religion" itself means to "tie something together." A "ligament" keeps our muscles together. Re-ligion ties our lives together. Laws and customs and policies develop.

But this longing for attachment and structure and order is matched by another, equally strong, polar force. Also deep in the human condition is the desire for freedom, the desire to be set free from things which bind us, things which tie us down. In every person, and in every generation, we know that some of the things which we are attached to, are really burdening us; they are not anchors for us. They are, instead, impediments, dragging behind the ship when we eagerly want to go to another place.

Religion has equally met this longing in the human condition, too. Religion provides structure, but it also

provides release. That is what makes it holy. So it is that Jesus talks deeply about being the New Law, the truth which sets us free from our bondage. Much of Christianity's success has been related to leading people out of bondage into new life. Evangelical conversion and the Civil Rights struggles are very much related to each other; they are about abandoning the old life in order to experience new life and freedom.

When we truly love, in holiness, we meet those twin pulls of religion. At its best, the Book of Leviticus holds us secure, and it also sets us free. At its best, religion binds us to what is good and life-giving, but it also sets us free. That is holy. At their best, loving parents set up structures of order and life, and they also set their children free. That is holy.

Healthy love includes all those Greek nuances, but those nuances disappear when we truly love another person. It doesn't matter whether that other person is God, or mother or father or sister or brother or neighbor or even enemy. Love is the ability to hold on to that other person and also to set them free. At its best, this is the love of Jesus. It is holy.

Hold on to that other person and also set them free. If that tension becomes too great: If you are in the middle of the magnet, and you do not know which pole should win out. If you do not know which side to err on, then err on the side of freedom. Give. Give time, give life, for-give, give to the other person, release them and set them free.

"You shall be holy," the Lord says. "You shall be holy, as I am holy. ...Love your neighbor as yourself."

AMEN.

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