



The Law Outside the Walls (Gratitude) – Lev 19:9-10, 33-34, 25:35-38
The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church, Brunswick – October 9, 2011

Introduction to the Scripture:

If you can't see, Ed won't read straight out of the Bible today. There is no way he could... our readings came from the book of Leviticus, and I chose individual laws from among lots of other options... he would have been flipping pages a lot.

Leviticus is not the most popular book in the Bible these days.

Part of that absence from our worship life has to do with what Leviticus is. It's not a story, or a letter, or a poem, like so many other parts of the Bible. It really just is a collection of laws... sometimes with a small story inserted. Even worse, it's not big, broad, "how do I get to be a good person" kind of law... this is no 10 Commandments we're dealing with here. Moses could not have carried all this down on stone tablets, and he probably would not have been very excited about it, even if he could have.

Most of the laws of Leviticus refer to the importance of ritual purity and practice as it should be observed by the ancient people of Israel, as you can parse out from its name: Leviticus, stemming from the "Levites" who were Israel's priestly tribe, charged with keeping the worship life of the people running smoothly.

It's pretty different from our lives today. But I want you to listen to the pattern of its speech, the way that it's constructed. The very frame it's built on. Listen for what the Spirit is saying to our Church.

Sermon

You know there are NO hymns in our hymnal that refer to Leviticus? I guess I can't be upset about the lack of good hymns about how to best clean up a ritually sacrificed ox. It really just doesn't have that pressing connection to my everyday life, you know? In fact, that's a really handy way to deal with this ancient rule book we're confronted with today. Leviticus was written by and for a culture and religious practice that only existed thousands of years ago, it has very little to do with our life.

As progressive Christians, we mainly hear about Leviticus when:

- people who aren't Christian want to poke fun for believing in a faith that has something as "out of date" as the Bible at its core.
- people who are Christian want to use Leviticus as a literal rule book for correct Christian life, and want to exclude, bully, and threaten whole swaths of people... that we know as our brothers and sisters. This book has indeed become a "Text of Terror" to many, especially GLTBQ folk. And we cannot overlook that.

With both parties, our answer may be the same. Well, we don't really read that book. It doesn't apply. Perhaps even more dangerously, and at the core of anti-semitism throughout centuries: "well, that book is bad, and Jesus replaced it all with his gospel." To do either is to at some level take ourselves off the hook, to say that our tradition does not have to be held to account for the violence and oppression that has been part of its history. To omit it also is to remove us from moments such as these readings, when we would want to affirm the most ancient traditions of communal justice that our faith knows.

Because pressed into to all that ritualistic practice are these laws of kindness, of care. And they make me wonder if we can really just write the whole thing off.

You can learn a lot about people from their laws. Historians know: a law is a good sign of two things:

1) Somebody is already doing the thing that is about to be outlawed.

2) People are worried about what the effect of that action will be if it catches on.

So in the case of Leviticus today, talking about our care for the stranger among the people of Israel, and talking about the care of those close to us in their time of trouble, we know that some people

were not treating the visitors in their community well. We know that people were going hungry. We know that even family members were charging punishing amounts of interest for loans that their relations needed to stay afloat.

At some level, then, we can tell that some things don't often change. As we've watched the news of our own most recent economic troubles crescendo, then broaden, then continue on far longer than any of us would have hoped or expected even while our society produces unprecedented profits for a few, we know the why of these laws. As we've seen immigration policies become policies of family separation, of exclusion, we know the why of *these* laws. These laws which call for kindness... well, we know the why because so many of us wish that they were still treasured, still written in our hearts and our culture.

So maybe the law does have something to say to us today. But maybe it's not in this or that particular prescription. The exact amount of grain to be used as an offering for letting your ox fall in a hole. Certainly, we have to reject the details of slavery, ritualistic killing, and violence towards others based on ancient standards of behavior which Leviticus lifts up, and which we hope are long separated from us.

Maybe what matters for us today is said in these laws over and over again, until it is a mantra. Maybe the how or the why of these laws is not as important as the "who."

What strikes me most about the law this day is this: "I am the Lord your God."

Over and over again, with different variations, these words appear in the law. Each one a reminder, each one an expression maybe of why the law exists, but more who the law is for.

And so Leviticus reminds its readers, over and over again, of not just why its laws are written down, but the who that is the why, who the laws honor. Because God is good. Because God is their God. Because God brought them out of Egypt. Because God was kind to them when they were aliens in a strange land.

The laws of Leviticus are harsh, and strange, and not of our world really... except for this: they are deeply tied up in believing how we act, and what law we put forward is a response to God's goodness. Their concern is not towards how much its believers owe to God... they owe God everything! Their concern is trying to create a culture that builds itself up with the understanding of, and correctly gives gratitude to, God to whom they owe all that they have and all that they are. You do these things not because God told you to. You do these things out of the thankful joy for what God has done for you.

What to give? What you have to give. Everywhere else in Leviticus there is exacting detail: this much ritual impurity means this many doves sacrificed, or this much grain, or what have you. Here, though: don't strip the vineyards bare... treat strangers among you as citizens... it all gets very open ended. Why?

I think a law that wants your gratitude wants your gratitude to be shaped like you. To be an echo of the gifts God gave you. In Leviticus's time, that meant you left whatever crops you grew for those in need.

The same has always been true here.

Some of you may not know all the history and connections of mission here at this church. The ways in which this church has taken care of those outside our walls... we have always had a lot of gifts and talents and resources here... and we have a long history of letting them run straight out the door into the world to do good work.

Many of the non-profit organizations that serve this community have their roots in this church, and were shaped by the gifts that God had given First Parish. We had doctors and dentists, so we have Oasis's Health Clinic. We had contractors and builders, so we have Habitat for Humanity. And well, like so many churches before us, ... we can put on a good feast, and so we have MidCoast Hunger Prevention.

As we go through the next months of our visioning process, starting with our Roots and Horizons All Church Conference in November, I hope we're paying attention to our gifts here in church, what God has given us, what talents, what resources... I hope we know what has been growing here in our little spiritual field... because that will be the seed for how we do missions in the future. That will be the shape of our gratitude to God... and that will be our law of kindness and of care.

That's how we'll know what to give back to the world. To the alien and stranger, to the friend who suffering in the economy, to the hungry.

So through that conference, we'll participate in Mission:1 (11/1/11 - 11/11/11) along with the rest of our United Church of Christ brother and sister churches. We'll collect food, especially during the conference. because giving back is the gratitude we show for what we have been given. Because, fed as we have been fed, God calls us to look to those who have not yet been.

Then, after we've collected everything... on November 13th, we're going to worship. But then the worship continues... we're going to hand deliver everything we've collected to MidCoast Hunger down the road a bit. We're gonna walk, we're gonna bring wagons, and wheelbarrows, and shopping carts, and our hands, and maybe the occasional truck to help us... because I hope we'll have a lot of food... and we're gonna walk down. But you see, this isn't just a walk... it's a parade. It's a celebration. It's a party where we are saying, "we've all been given incredible gifts from God. And we are so thankful, we're just going to pour it all right back into the world." I hope you'll come.

This is the party we invite each other and the world into. Giving to all as we have been given to... forgiving debts as ours have been forgiven... following an ancient and still true law of gratitude that invites us out of our four walls and into the world. Amen.