

October 23, 2011  
 "What About the Middle?"  
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KEY VERSE: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you." Isaiah 41:10

TEXT: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

19:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. ...

15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

#### INTRODUCTION

The lectionary outlines scripture passages for the Sundays over three years. This is the Old Testament lesson for today. When I read it I immediately thought: I'll use this passage! It mentions not taking vengeance or bearing a grudge, a great follow-up to our forgiveness study of the past month. It has spiritual and social justice challenges, which are part of my not-so-hidden agenda. But I was taught to always read in context. And so I thought: What about the middle? What did the theologians who put the lectionary together chose to leave out? Here's the middle:

3 "Each of you must respect your mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God. 4."Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the LORD your God. 5."When you sacrifice a fellowship offering to the LORD, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf. 6. It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it or on the next day; anything left over until the third day must be burned up. 7. If any of it is eaten on the third day, it is impure and will not be accepted. 8. Whoever eats it will be held responsible because they have desecrated what is holy to the LORD; they must be cut off from their people. 9. "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God. 10. "Do not steal. "Do not lie. 11. "Do not deceive one another. 12. "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD. 13. "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. "Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. 14. "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD."

Friends, we have a problem. Many of these instructions are in the Ten Commandments, others are just plain obtuse. What do we do with this bunch of rules, some we follow and some we don't? I spent time studying Eugene Peterson's "Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading"; it's from the Church Library. Peterson, writer of the Message Bible, gave me some pointers.

#### CONSIDER THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

We do not live in the society and culture where these words made sense. We don't have the same

needs or neighbors. These rules say we shouldn't gather our crops all up. We should leave the edges of the field and the late fruit for the poor. Come to find out, the other people in the region followed this practice. If God's people hadn't, they would have appeared greedy and uncaring. But if you had people walking around in your garden this fall you'd probably call the police. We call it trespassing.

And we all pay our employees or we get paid on pay day, not every day! Why? Partly because we have refrigerators. We can buy food on pay day and have it keep for two weeks. The ancient people needed to buy food everyday. No pay, no food. It's all about cultural context.

Eugene Peterson says: "Exegesis (the translation, use and study of the Bible) is an act of sustained humility: There is so much about this text that I will never know" (p. 57). We might know the English words, but we don't know the culture. Say this: "I don't know".

Some of the cultural rules we wouldn't think to follow: Leviticus 25:44 states that we can possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. So it's "biblical" for us to own slaves, as long as they are from Mexico or Canada. Leviticus 19:19 says we shouldn't wear clothing made of two different kinds of thread. I really don't think God cares if you wear a poly-cotton blend permanent press shirt. It mattered then, I don't know why; it doesn't matter now.

#### CONSIDER THE SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

There was a very specific process for atonement- paying for sins, before the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Peterson says it this way:

"No text can be understood out of its entire context. The most 'entire' context is Jesus. Every biblical text must be read in the living presence of Jesus" (102). I love the bulletin cover- the cross is the spiritual context.

How does this influence our reading of the Bible? How do we use it if only part of it applies? We consider the spiritual context. Scripture is our guide for faithful living and our source for learning the amazing grace of Jesus. Peterson challenges: "it is possible to read the Bible from a number of different angles and for various purposes without dealing with God as God has revealed himself, without setting ourselves under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who is alive and present in everything we are and do" (40). Our goal with scripture is to draw closer to God.

#### CONSIDER THE PROBLEM OF "PICKING"

So we read in the light of the culture and the Christ. We treat the words as what they are: the inspired word of God. We have to understand, as Peterson wrote:

"We pick up a Bible and find that we have God's word in our hands, *our hands*. We can now handle it. It is easy enough to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish without regard to appropriateness or conditions" (81-2). We can't; we shouldn't be that cavalier. This is serious, holy work. We are to be holy as God is holy.

Peterson also wrote: "...Bible verses are not fortune cookies to be broken open at random" (101). We know we can string verses together and omit some to make appropriate readings, prayers of confession and affirmations of faith. The writers' of the lectionary did it; I did it for today's liturgy.

But there is a lot of danger in doing that. Combine words from the gospel accounts of Matthew 27:5 and Luke 10:37 and you get: "Judas went away and hanged himself." "Jesus said 'Go and do likewise'". No.

We read and quote with the utmost respect for the word of God. We remember the spiritual and cultural context, and avoid picking and choosing as much as possible.

#### CONSIDER THE BLESSINGS AND POSSIBILITIES

Many people have memorized passages of scripture. Our children do it. Often these words, hid in our hearts, are accessible for our whole lives. People I've visited, deep in the hold of dementia, or near to meeting their maker, can recite Psalm 23 with minimal prompting.

For use in our Wellness class I gathered some verses that are helpful when struggling with food cravings. We printed them onto business sized cards. And I carry them in my purse. I'll give you a sample. Hear the word of the LORD:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. Psalm 32:8

Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:4

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6

Let your eye look directly ahead, and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Proverbs 4:25

The Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him. Isaiah 30:18

Let the weak say: "I AM STRONG!" Joel 3:10

And one more, it's on your bulletin bookmark, and I have a story to tell. "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you." Isaiah 41:10.

Last week Monday morning I had no agenda. I got up, got ready and drove to Battle Creek with no time line. I was eastbound on I-94 and just before the Helmer Road exit I saw a car on the side of the road. "Out of gas or flat tire", I thought to myself. As I got to the exit I saw a young woman, dressed all in pink, walking up the ramp. I exited, and slowed down as quickly as I could. I threw the junk from the passenger seat into the back and put down the window. The woman seemed uncertain as she looked in at me. My clergy robe was draped on the backseat; I had done a wedding on the Saturday before, and hadn't brought it in last Sunday. Pointing to it, I quickly said: "I'm Pat, I'm a minister. Let me give you a ride somewhere." As she opened the door she slowly and quietly said: "It's already been a rough morning. I'm getting picked up at Miller's Time Out. I've seen you somewhere before."

My truthful response was: "I do a lot of weddings and funerals." She looked at me again and realized I had officiated at her friend's wedding. I confirmed the couple's names, the location and the reason I did the wedding, I was a last minute fill-in for a sick pastor. I said: "I really like to do weddings, but I like to know the couple better than I did them." We chatted for a minute about that couple and that pastor, who she also knew. We pulled into the restaurant, but she didn't get out of my car. I turned off the engine; she stared out the side window.

"My pastor baptized me, and later in life baptized my husband. He did our wedding;" she said. With a

deep breath and then a sob she said. "But we're going to get a divorce. He didn't come home again last night. He's seeing a married woman and doing drugs. I know I can't keep taking him back. But I don't know anything else. I love him." She stared out the window and cried quietly. Her ride pulled up.

She jumped out of my car, and a strong thought came to me: give her my card. I reached into my purse and pulled out one of my cards, and saw my pack of verses. The top one read: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you" (Isaiah 41:10). I got out and took her those along with my card, and said: "Here are some Bible verses. Call me any time."

I haven't heard from her, and I don't know if I will. I do know that I was awed by what God did that morning. If I had left a minute earlier or later I wouldn't have seen her. If she hadn't recognized me she might not have gotten in my car. If I hadn't put those verses together for the Wellness class, or kept them in my purse... If not, then what?

I don't know. I do know that we have a God who is communicating with this world through the words of the Bible. God is still speaking through the ancient, sometimes foreign to our culture, sometimes foreign to our theology, sometimes taken out of context words that are never without the power of God's love. Thanks be to God, and to the Word which was made flesh and is made real. AMEN