

Marquand Chapel
Tuesday, September 27, 2005

The Word of the Lord
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Leviticus 19

When I first read the lessons appointed for today, my initial reaction was, “Why on earth are we reading this lesson from Leviticus?” Indeed, it seemed highly unlikely that we would get anything edifying from this text. As I thought more about today’s texts, however, it occurred to me that, given the fact that this text was to be read, I could hardly ignore it. When preaching from the lectionary, the preacher has some responsibility to address difficult texts. Besides, in a world in which ecclesial statements on sexuality draw on laws recorded in Leviticus, it seemed time for me to preach my first sermon based on this book of the Pentateuch.

The first question this text poses for us is what, if anything, does it have to do with us? Here we have a list of commandments that the hearer is commanded to obey precisely because they were pronounced by God: “I am the Lord your God,” is the repeated over and over. These commandments are presented, quite literally, as the word of God. If the word of God is true for all times and all places, then these words must also, in some way be true. But, quite frankly, I’m really not certain whether or not my hair and beard are in compliance with this dictum (I suspect not). And I suspect that those among you who have tattoos might be wondering what to make of this text, as well.

As you all have learned in your OT survey course, however, it isn’t quite that simple. In fact, these laws were written at a time when the people of Israel were living next to or among people who had very different religious practices. These laws are intended to draw a line in the sand. The people of Israel were to keep themselves separate from their neighbors. Divination and the magic arts were prohibited because Israel’s neighbors used these means to attempt to plumb divine secrets or to control events; the mourning customs of Israel’s neighbors (cutting of the hair, body lacerations, tattooing) were means of warding off the departed spirits by changing one’s appearance, so the spirits wouldn’t recognize them); Israel’s neighbors also sent their daughters into cultic prostitution, where they participated in rites to ensure the earth’s fertility; consultation with mediums or fortunetellers was a way to commune with the dead and foresee the future. All of these things were prohibited to the Israelites. By way of contrast, their worship was to follow the commandment: “You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary.”

Several years ago there was a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School who grew up as a Lutheran in Austria. Austria, of course, is a predominantly Roman Catholic country, and historically, Lutherans were a persecuted minority. This professor said that, in order to establish their own identity, the Lutherans adopted practices different from their Roman Catholic neighbors. The Catholic priests wore vestments; the Lutherans wore simple robes. The Catholics knelt in church; the Lutherans did not. The Catholics crossed themselves; the Lutherans did not. The Catholics had weekly Eucharist; the Lutherans did not. When he came

to New Haven, this professor attended Bethesda Lutheran Church down the hill. At Bethesda, Lutherans wear vestments, Lutherans kneel, Lutherans cross themselves, Lutherans have weekly Eucharist. He was amazed by all this, and said so, but he continued to come to Bethesda, for he knew that there is more to being Lutheran than such cultural practices.

So what are we to make of this? What is the message of this text for us today? In 1958 Krister Stendahl, who was to become the Dean of Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Stockholm, wrote a booklet called *The Bible and the Role of Women* (ET: 1966) in which he argued in favor of the ordination of women. In this booklet he argues that the case for the ordination of women is the same as the case for the emancipation of women. That is to say, if one favors the right of women to vote, one cannot argue that they should not be ordained. (Today this might not seem controversial, but in 1958, when few churches were ordaining women, it was.) The hermeneutical principle he cites in favor of this observation is from Martin Luther's sermon "How Christians should regard Moses." There Luther said:

One must handle and deal with Scripture soberly. The Word originally came into being in many different ways. One must not only observe it is God's Word, or that God has spoken it, but also to whom it is spoken. Does it concern you or someone else? Here is a distinction like that between summer and winter. God said many things to David, God commanded him to do this and that. But what God said to David does not apply to me, that word has not been spoken to me. ... There are two kinds of Word in the Scripture. The one does not apply to me, nor does it concern me. The other does concern me, and upon this one, which concerns me, I may venture boldly and depend upon it as upon a strong rock. If it does not concern me, I must stand still. The false prophets come and say, 'Dear people, this is the Word of God!' That is true, we cannot deny it, but we are not that people to whom God speaks."

Indeed, Luther contended that none of the laws of Moses apply to the Christian; they were written for the people of Israel. The word God speaks to the Christian is the gospel, the good news God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is the word that Luther says concerns him, the word upon which he could depend as upon a strong rock.

"The word of the Lord," the reader says at the conclusion of the lesson. And the people reply, "Thanks be to God." And then the people must ask themselves, but is this God's word for me? Today's Old Testament lesson, I would say it is an interesting reading, showing how the people of Israel understood God to be working among them many centuries ago. But is it God's word to me? I think not.

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