

Comments**Seventh Sunday after Epiphany**

February 19, 2023

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18

NRSV

Our reading is the keynote of the Holiness Code found in Chapters 17-26. The people have been separated for a special covenant with the God who liberated them from Egypt (v. 36). Israel's holiness, therefore, is derived from relationship to the holy God; it is not an intrinsic quality of their own life. Holiness here includes wholeness, perfection, and relationships between people, ethics.

They are not to indulge in pagan religious practices (v. 4). The "images" are of pagan gods. The "sacrifice of well-being" (v. 5) was a covenant meal in which the worshipper was sacramentally related to God and the community. By "the third day" (v. 7) the meat was tainted ("an abomination") so eating it was sinful.

While pagan peoples left the harvest on the "edges" (v. 9) of the fields to honour a god, Israelites are to leave it for the needy and for resident foreigners ("alien", v. 10) While "steal" in v. 11 means kidnap, in v. 13 it refers to robbery. To testify falsely by God is forbidden (v. 12); doing so is to be irreverent to God. You shall not withhold property from ("defraud", v. 13) a fellow. To insult a deaf person (who can't hear it) and to cause a blind person to trip (over an object he can't see) are forbidden (v. 14). Judgements in court must be equitable (v. 15). You must tell the truth, and present all evidence that may save the life of an accused (v. 16). Love members of your family and fellow Israelites, neither taking vengeance nor nursing anger (vv. 17-18). If a fellow Israelite errs, correct him – not to do so would be a sin. Love your fellow Israelite as you love yourself.

Psalm 119:33-40

NRSV

The psalmist prays that he may understand the Law. In Hebrew, each verse begins with the letter he, the fifth letter. Our reading is the fifth eight-line stanza. Each verse contains a synonym for law: "statutes", "commandments", "decrees", "ways", "promise", "ordinances" and "precepts". He asks God to orient him towards the Law, to avoid love of personal gain, and to turn him away from all that is futile (v. 37a) and to help him ignore the taunts of those who see keeping the Law as misguided (v. 39a).

1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23

NRSV

Paul has offered two metaphors for the Church: a crop in a "field" (v. 9) and a "building". As God's agents, he and Apollos have worked together: he has planted, i.e. founded the church at Corinth, and Apollos has watered, i.e. nurtured the community. He now likens the growth of the church to constructing a building. He founded the community properly; "that foundation is Jesus Christ" (v. 11). Others must construct the building above the foundation "with care" (v. 10). Sloppy or improper craftsmanship will be apparent on "the Day" (v. 13), when

Christ comes again to judge people; he will evaluate it ("with fire"). Good work will be rewarded, but those whose work fails the test will be saved, but only just (v. 15). Perhaps he thinks of leaders who expected all Christians to obey Mosaic law and follow Jewish practices.

He now changes metaphor again: "you are God's temple" (v. 16); the Holy Spirit is within you. The disputes among members of which he has heard (1:11), and attempts to divert the church from its founding principle (Christ) can destroy it (v. 17). God will condemn those who do so. If you think you are wise by earthly standards, may you become foolish in earthly terms in order to become wise by God's standards (v. 18). So end your quarrels regarding leaders (v. 20). You "belong" (1:12) to none of them; rather you belong "to Christ" (v. 23) and "to God". They are servants of Christ and thus of the church. Through Christ's death and resurrection, they, and everything else, belong to you (the community), and you to Christ.

Matthew 5:38-48

NRSV

The Pharisees and the scribes kept Mosaic law diligently, and taught it. Jesus has said this is not enough; one must exceed the requirements of the Law (v. 20). He fleshes out its meaning fully (v. 17). For example (vv. 21-22), God expects us to refrain not only from the act (e.g. murder) but from even thinking thoughts that may lead to it (e.g. nursing anger).

In v. 38, Jesus reminds his audience of two laws. They did limit retaliation to *one for one*. By Jesus' time the authorities often commuted the penalty to a fine. Jesus goes further: avoid physical violence (v. 39). To strike "the right cheek" with the back of the hand was particularly dishonouring; shame your opponent into a change of heart. Avoid litigation (v. 40); overcome greed with generosity to the wrong-doer. The "coat" was the inner garment, a short-sleeved knee-length tunic held in at the waist by a girdle; the "cloak" was the outer garment. Now v. 41: a soldier could force a civilian to carry his pack. The Greek words translated "forces" and "mile" reflect the imperial messenger service, a courier service using relays of horses. To "go ... the second mile" would be to avoid another civilian being compelled. Be generous, even under duress.

"Love your neighbour" (v. 43) is in Leviticus 19:18. People generally thought that outsiders were "enemies" and should be *hated*. V. 44 is wise advice for overcoming persecution. To be "children of" (v. 45) God is to pattern one's attitudes after God's; he provides for all, both good and evil people. In v. 46, Jesus thinks of both earthly and heavenly "reward". "Tax collectors" worked under contract with the Romans. To meet their stipulated target, they often extorted money; they collaborated with the occupiers. Being morally suspect, their reward was seen as being only earthly. A *greeting* (v. 47) in the Near East, then and now, is a prayer for blessing on the one greeted. "The Gentiles" were at the time mostly pagan. What distinguishes your love from that of unbelievers? "Be perfect" (v. 48), conform to the divine ideal, as God does: love everyone!