

Wednesday Lent 5 – April 1, 2020

The idea behind the reading selections for our Wednesday Lenten gatherings was highlighting Jesus' role in restoring God's original purpose for the Law: Commandments intended for human good – not as an “onerous burden” on God's people. The wisdom of Leviticus 19 not only assumes that the Law was intended for our good, it proclaims that God is honored when we reflect the Law's good intentions in our daily lives. For as God's Children, what we do, how we behave, how we treat one another is supposed to reflect God's Character; that as far as the world is concerned, God's Character is revealed by how we live – for good or ill! Leviticus 19, therefore, demands that our actions “**be holy**” as “**God is holy**”! For this is how the world sees God, through us! This is a truly daunting concept. As limited and flawed beings, we cannot hope to approach the holiness of God. So what are we to do? Give up? No. Leviticus 19 also provides the answer, defining holiness on a human scale, in “bite sized” chunks that we can manage – or at least strive towards...

“You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old” (19:32). This command demands we respect the oldest, frailest members of the human community; teaching that God is honored when we do this. Verse 32 extends the idea of the honor we owe our parents: to remember their sacrifices for us – made when we were helpless and vulnerable. As fully grown adults we are to “return the favor”, as age and health has made our parents vulnerable – and not only our parents, but all who are aged, even those who are not “blood” kin. Leviticus 19 teaches that God is honored when we love, care for, and respect one another, with special emphasis on the most vulnerable among us – those neglected by “normal” society or who are at the greatest risk of being preyed upon. The elderly fall into this category, as do “aliens” resident among us: who lack the knowledge and ability to protect themselves from exploitation. The goal of these instructions, however, is not to grant anyone “special status”, but to ensure the welfare of everyone – young and old, rich and poor, male and female, resident and alien – that no one be neglected, cheated, or exploited. The “scales”, Leviticus 19 says, whether in the courtroom or the marketplace, shall be fair and honest – for the same reason. No one is to be “taken advantage of”! Instead, we are to “look out” for others even as we “look out” for ourselves – for true love, love as God loves, does not seek “personal” advantage, but is poured out for the sake of others. This is God's Character. It is to be ours as well. (Now the Gospel)

In Jesus' time there was perhaps no more prevalent stereotype of those who took advantage of others than the “tax collector”. Far from the mandate of the “IRS”, tax collectors in ancient Palestine were intermediaries who “brokered” various material “rights” out to businesses on behalf of Rome. While the Empire claimed “ownership” of everything, rather than trying to run all businesses, Rome sold various “rights” for a percentage of the “take”. In practice, Roman governors delegated their authority to market “rights” out to “clients” for an additional “fee”. These clients would “in turn” contract with tax collectors to do the actual collection. “Fees” obviously had a way of compounding, as each level took its “cut” – based on what they could charge without killing the business itself. The local “tax collector” became the face of this highly exploitive system – a truth that remained regardless of the honesty of an individual “collector”. In short, Jesus could hardly have chosen a more unpopular and controversial figure to dine with than Matthew – who, given the circumstances, was probably the local holder of Rome's “fishing rights”.

The Pharisees probably saw Jesus' dinner choice as an enormous blunder – an opportunity to undercut his popularity with the local people, and perhaps with his own disciples. That is why they directed their questions, not to Jesus, but to the disciples themselves, some of whom were fishermen! This raises some obvious questions, “Why did he do it, eat with Matthew and other tax collectors? Why did Jesus call Matthew to be one of his disciples?” Jesus, of course, was far too “canny” to make such an obvious “mistake”. Therefore, we can conclude that calling Matthew was a carefully considered, purposeful choice. As a rabbi, Jesus was always teaching. Sitting down to eat with Matthew and other tax collectors was, no doubt, another of Jesus' lessons. Hearing – likely anticipating – the Pharisees' question to his disciples, Jesus said “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” But who are the “sick” Jesus refers to? Who was his lesson intended for? Almost certainly, Jesus intended that everyone involved come away “healed” in some needed way.

Tax collectors: part of an exploitative system, were also victims of it. Outcasts from their own people – even those who tried to be honest – most of what they collected went to others “up the food chain”. Tax collectors likely socialized with other tax collectors because no one else would have anything to do with them. Jesus, just as he had done with so many lepers and other outcasts, broke all the social barriers and treated Matthew as a human being and not as a pariah! It was an obvious risk, but one that Jesus did not hesitate to take. Healing, love, forgiveness... Matthew probably experienced all of these at once – as did all who sat down with Jesus at dinner that night.

Jesus' disciples: like all other Israelites, they resented the Empire and all who collaborated with it. Matthew was Rome's “local face” – the one who collected the money that kept Rome in power! Yet Matthew was also an Israelite, a Jew, someone just trying to make his way under difficult circumstances. Jesus' disciples needed to see Matthew as something other than a symbol of the hated Empire. They needed to be healed of their hate and restored to their neighbor, to learn that if God's Kingdom was to spread, it would have to be able to reach many like Matthew – whose lives had been “co-opted” by Rome.

The Pharisees believed themselves to be the true “guides” to the Law, examples of how to live as God intended. They had attained their “status” by chastising and ultimately separating themselves from anyone who did not live up to “their” standards. The Pharisees set themselves up as “judges” over their neighbors, judges without compassion or mercy – blind to the good God intended in the Law. Jesus hoped that his actions might open their eyes to the truth.

In order to fulfill the purpose of the Law – the creation of a people whose lives reflected God's good, loving, and merciful Character – Jesus intentionally broke down all the barriers between people, all that prevented them from experiencing and being neighbors to one another. He touched the “untouchable”, dined with the outcast, and comforted and welcomed the lost. Jesus' actions **made him** the fulfillment of God's Law, for everywhere he went, Jesus poured himself out in order to create a people reflecting God's love. He continued to fulfill the purpose of the Law even as he was led to Calvary and nailed to a cross by those who attitudes had made them blind to God's love, blind to God's “image” within their neighbors. Amen