

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Seventh Sunday After The Epiphany
19 February 2017

Scripture readings:

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Psalm 119:33-40

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

Well, as you know, I revel in the reality that we are a liturgical church. It makes my job so much easier. I don't have to figure out what it is we're going to celebrate on any given Sunday, and get this straight folks: I again must tell you I did not pick the texts for today, and I'm afraid that some of the stuff we read from scripture is a shoe that sometimes fits and we must wear it, seriously. We must allow the words that we hear in scripture at least to create for us a discussion about what it is we believe and how it is we live out that belief in the world. And that's not an easy thing to do. It never has been, I am sure.

I invite all of you to read *Constantine's Sword* which is a 600-page book but it is really quite interesting to read. It's essentially a pot-boiler about our history as Christians and what a bunch of stinkers we have been - all in the name of Christ, all in the name of God.

We are approaching Lent which in the Church is known as a penitential season which is the business of somehow standing before God with a certain amount of security and acknowledging who it is we are not and who it is God is. I must confess to you today I didn't have anything to do with the Collect for today but what an extraordinary complex sentence or two that is. I have never encountered a Collect quite like this one. Let's go back to it: "*O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing.*" I don't have any trouble with that. Do you? "*Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love.*" Now let's just put that high on the hook right here in front of us and not lose sight of that one word for the rest of the day. "*...love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which...*" So without love, without peace, without virtue "*...whoever lives is accounted dead.*" So our confession at the beginning of this service was that we are as dead if we do not have love and virtue and, even in this world, peace.

Then we turn to the Leviticus text. I must confess to you that I was tempted just to re-read the Leviticus text as the sermon. Quietly and patiently it packs a punch. "*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor...*" These are words of scripture; not mine. "*You shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.*" These are God's words. "*You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.*" Pay those who work for you promptly, and don't cheat them out of their wages. "*You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.*" You shall not mock the afflicted, period. "*I am your Lord. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.*" What might that mean? Could it mean that all people, great and small, wealthy and poor, should stand before the law equally? Even the very, very wealthy as much as the very, very poor. "*With justice you shall judge your neighbor*" - justice, not prejudice. "*You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am God speaking. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin.*" It gets tough, doesn't it, when we have sisters and brothers who are troublesome, but the advice to us is to not hate them. It doesn't mean we can't figure out ways to live with them. "*You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.*" What does that mean? It means speaking the truth in love. It does not mean shutting down the dialogue and it does not mean, as far as I'm concerned, agreeing to disagree. It means having a decent conversation based in truth about truth, no matter to whom we are speaking. Otherwise we become guilty.

That's what it says in Leviticus. "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The implication in that is we need to learn to love ourselves better. What does it mean to love ourselves? I have a suspicion it means to believe that we are, in fact,

loved by God, and that means that we operate on a different kind of economy than the rest of the world is using to operate on. What do I mean? Money from my pocket, a symbol of economy. I had to go to the bank yesterday before I went to breakfast with Don and Sue Anderson. And then I forgot it was a holiday weekend and was glad I went. I emptied my checking account down to eleven dollars and whatever cents. I couldn't write my offering check this morning. It comes next week double.

But this kind of economy means if I take this twenty dollar bill and I give it to Pat for her 75th birthday, that means that the \$45 that I had in my pocket becomes 25. And then if I give a couple of dollars to some children and a couple more dollars here, by the time I go out to breakfast, I'll have to have somebody else pay for it, and I will have nothing left in my pocket and my economy goes to zero. I think the suggestion in scripture about God's love is that God's love is not like dollars and cents, but God's love is more like a candle.

We just celebrated Candlemas on the second of February in the Church which is an interesting day because it's a layered feast. It's the day when the Church remembers that Mary went to the temple to be purified 40 days after Christmas when Jesus was presented in the temple. It's a sort of hinge day in the life of the year when we start seeing signs of spring. In England they do something called "beat the boundaries." They go out and walk around the perimeter of church properties so they know where things are. It's when traditionally fields start to be prepared for spring. Among the Pennsylvania Dutch it's Groundhog Day, predicting the weather for the coming planting season. It's also the day in England when all of the candles for the coming year were blessed for use in the church.

Last week when there were so few of us in church John lit the altar candles but he didn't light the candles in the chandelier. He said, "*I didn't forget. There's a church rule that there shouldn't be more candles lit in the church than there are people present.*" [laughter] He was kidding, but it's just become a church rule here. [laughter] A great idea, reminding us that we are the light of the world, and the economy of light and candles that we know about scientifically is if you take flame from one candle and divide it onto another candle, you end up with twice as much rather than half as much. It's a different kind of economy which was known in colonial times because sconces with candles or coal oil lamps like the ones lighting the church often had a reflecting mirror behind them, and that one light became two lights because it was reflected. It's a different kind of economy than dollars and cents.

Faithful people from long before Jesus' time understood that God's economy, God's wisdom, God's understanding of creation is very different from the understandings we are often given to as sinful people. It's encouraging when we turn to scripture and remember that God has a different perspective and a different outlook on the world and on creation than we have. The divine economy is one that invites us to believe that if we share, in fact we have more.

Do you remember the days of *Look* magazine when we saw grain piled by bulldozers in the streets in the Middle West and there were people around the world starving? Don't you think we could have made allies out of our enemies by feeding them? It might have been worth a try. Or maybe even made allies out of our own people by feeding the hungry here, starting at home.

"*The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*" Now if I want to be understood as anything, I really don't mind being understood as wise. But often people add another three-letter word to that and it's not a compliment. [laughter] It just may be that's what St. Paul is saying here: "*The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*" God has a different kind of wisdom from ours. "*So let no one boast about human leaders.*" I didn't pick these texts. I didn't translate them. These are not my choices of words. And it is religious to talk about this, and I suppose to some of us it even looks political. "*Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours.*" As Christian people here is the joy, the good news of our faith and our God - that we are going to be influenced by God's perspective on the world rather than by the political one or the economic one that doesn't reflect God's way of thinking about things and each other.

Paul is worried about division in the church because he talks about Apollos or Cephas. He assures them that all things are yours and you don't have to worry about life or death or the present or the future. "*All of you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.*" And do you remember what we hung up here not to forget: *God is*

love.

Now, friends, we live in a nation which in 1954 added two words to the Pledge of Allegiance: “*one Nation **under God.***” Our national motto is “*In God we trust.*” Now what did we hang on the hook up here. **God is love.** We’ve got an advantage on these things, friends. We trust in love, and we trust in an eternal love, and we believe in a kind of economy which is more like the flame of a candle than the 57 dollars in the bottom of your pocket. And that’s what gives us a voice in this world. And that’s why it drives me around the bend when it is suggested that we not talk either about religion or politics. But remember to talk, not holler. It’s exchange of ideas, and it’s talk about love which is eternal and belongs to all from a Creator God who creates the entire world and everyone who lives in it - including us - and invites us to believe that all others are somehow or another our brothers and sisters. And we must, dear friends, remember that in terms of the world we are the wealthiest people in it.

I was very, very deeply moved by a sign from Canada which said, “*When you are more fortunate than others, build a larger table.*” Now if I say the rest of it, I’ll be accused of being political, but I don’t care - *Build a larger table; not a higher wall!*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.