

Sermon by the Rector
Sunday, July 11, 2010

[Deuteronomy 30:9-14](#)

[Psalm 25:1-9](#)

[Colossians 1:1-14](#)

[Luke 10:25-37](#)

There's a very appealing straightforwardness, simplicity and clarity about the gospel and Old Testament readings today – balm for our jaded modern hearts. The young lawyer, responding to Jesus' question, summarizes the law: "You shall love the Lord your God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself". Jesus says, "You have given the right answer." How often does it happen, that a question about how we should live has a right answer, and we know it?

In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses assures the people that the word, the rule, the law for living a righteous life is near at hand – not over the sea, where someone needs to go and bring it back, or in heaven, where someone needs to ascend and bring it down, but in our hearts and on our lips. God's direction is simple, straightforward, clear; there are questions that have right answers, and we can know them. Again: balm for jaded hearts.

But a voice within registers a protest: It's not that simple! Things are complicated, complex; sometimes there are no "right" answers, and if there are, we often don't, or can't, know them. The law may lie close at hand, but insight into its application to the "real" world sometimes seems far away, up in heaven or across the ocean. If we're honest we have to admit that we ourselves sometimes introduce complications, unnecessarily and in our own narrow self-interest. In this we resemble the priest and the levite. Neither was necessarily malicious, or even cold-hearted, just busy. They had full calendars, and were undoubtedly on their way to take care of important obligations. They just didn't have time to tend to the man by the side of the road. Other duties beckoned. They'd let their lives get so complicated that they couldn't stop to help a stricken neighbor.

Still, the world is undeniably complicated in ways over which we have no control and for which we are not responsible. It defies us to find the clarity and straightforwardness we crave. The "expertise" of lawyers, priests and Levites comes in for some rough treatment in today's parable and throughout the gospels, but we sometimes need experts to help us chart our course.

The Bible provides some specific instructions as to the application of God's law, but they exacerbate complications more often than they eliminate them. Here are a few examples:

Leviticus, chapter 25, tells us that the commandment to love God and our neighbor requires us to care for the stranger and the sojourner, and to ensure that workers receive just compensation for their labor. I'm no economist, but my limited reading has convinced me that these two imperatives sometimes conflict. Balancing them judiciously

– not to mention selling any proposed compromise to various constituencies – doesn't really admit of a "right" answer, only a kind of rough and tentative justice.

This same chapter enjoins us to care for the poor in our midst. But in the public realm, at least, many of our efforts have fallen short. Even the most liberal among us has to admit that well-intentioned government programs have, in part, served to create a more-or-less permanent underclass, while even zealous advocates of market-based remediation concede that untrammelled capitalism excludes many individuals, even whole classes of people, from its blessings.

On the level of personal and intimate relations: the same book of Leviticus teaches us to "rise up before the hoary head", to honor and respect the aged. Another way to fulfill the Great Commandment. But the issues that gather around the hoary head sometimes confound us: what does it mean to honor this person, who may suffer from dementia, who may not know, or be able to communicate, what he or she wants or needs, who may have become a person completely different from the one we knew at an earlier stage in their life?

Malachi tells the husbands of Israel: Love the wife of your youth. Do not stray, in heart, mind or body, from the one to whom a sacred covenant binds you. But in 10, or 20, or 30 or 40 years of marriage, we may have gotten out of the habit of communication. We may not know, really, what our partner wants or needs, or even be clear about our own hopes for life together. What does it mean to love this person when, honestly, I've come to take him or her, and us, a little bit for granted?

Ephesians and First Timothy instructs parents to discipline their children, but also to show them patience and kindness. But in what measure should parents combine these injunctions, for a charming 3-year-old, a sullen 16-year-old, or a child who's 28 going on 12?

I could multiply Biblical citations and contemporary challenges but – I promise – I won't. The ones I've adduced suffice to make the point: the commandment is clear, but the world is both complicated and complex. Figuring out how to love God and neighbor isn't easy; if there are "right answers" we usually don't know them.

Seen in the light of this situation, lines from the collect and the psalm for today acquire new power and poignancy. The collect asks God to help us "both know and understand what we ought to do": the redundancy – "know and understand" – makes us feel that this is less a pious invocation than a cry from the depths of a heart trying to identify the right course of action in the face of vexing circumstances. The same holds for the third verse of psalm 25: "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths."

The passage from the letter to the Colossians captures our dilemma. It assures us that God has transferred us from the realm of darkness to the kingdom of light – in part, at least, into the clear light of the commandment as the lawyer recited it to Jesus. But it

also warns us that we will need endurance for a continuing struggle to “know and understand” what God requires of us. It’s a “now / not yet”, “at hand / far off” proposition; the victory is won, but the battle continues; we’re on our way from darkness to light, but the journey is long and the path not always clear.

We don’t like finding ourselves in the “now / not yet” position. We like to know what we’re getting into before acting or speaking. The Samaritan’s action discomfits us. Who was the man by the side of the road? Why was he traveling that road? Who were his friends, and who his enemies? What might he expect of the Samaritan in the future? It’s a “now / not yet” situation: the law urges us to care for the person in need, but we don’t know where our action might lead. Things are complicated.

Sometimes, though – not always, but sometimes - it’s good to do a simple thing in a complicated situation: to act when we’re not sure what to do, speak when we’re not sure what to say, to go without knowing what we’re getting ourselves into. The “now / not yet”, “at hand / far off” has its own wisdom. A Samaritan-like act, or word, or gesture – direct, concrete, immediate, near at hand – probably won’t reduce complexities or resolve complications. It might create more or them. But in God’s eyes, if not always in ours, it’s the right answer. It bears the fruit of wisdom, and moves us along the path from darkness to light.

Peter Wallace and I serve together on the board of a not-for-profit agency here in the District. We’re facing some personnel issues. It’s a complicated situation. We’re struggling to mediate among various moral and institutional claims. Last Thursday evening we discussed the situation at mind-numbing length. At a certain point we seemed to realize that the conversation had grown pretty cold-hearted, that we were talking a lot, mostly critically, about someone who wasn’t there. One member said, “Why don’t a few of us just talk with (the person in question) and see what they think?” I felt a little as though we were being transferred from the realm of darkness to the kingdom of light. The Executive Committee has had conversations with this person already, but the parties seem to have staked out mutually exclusive, even hostile, positions. The group now charged with having a conversation is comprised of people with less of an unpleasant history on the issues before us. We’ll have to be guarded and prudent, careful with what we say, of course, and we still might make things worse for ourselves than they already are. But my colleague’s suggestion pointed us toward a gesture, a word, an act of love. He’s called us to follow in the Samaritan’s footsteps, and I trust some wisdom will come of it.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself”: thus says the lawyer in response to Jesus’ question. “You have given the right answer”, the Master responds. The law is near at hand, not up in the heavens or across the ocean. It’s simple and clear, while life is complicated and opaque. Neither alters the reality of the other. But a gesture, word or act of love – always near at hand – always, in the long term or the short, in an expected or a surprising way, brings wisdom. Bend our gaze to the Samaritan’s act of mercy, Lord, and send us forth to do likewise.