



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Maturity”*

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20, I Corinthians 3:1-9*

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Every Sunday, ministers of many faith traditions preach from a schedule of readings that include two passages from the Old Testament and two passages from the New.

Elizabeth and Rachel often preach from the Lectionary. I bet that when Jen is preaching regularly, she will too. You can take the gal out of the Episcopal Church, but you can't take the Episcopal Church out of the gal. Early in my ministry, I did too, but it has been decades since I have done so regularly. I once got scolded for not doing so from this very pulpit. One of our very best Edmunds Lecturers, Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson, is Roman Catholic, a church in which following the Lectionary is mandatory. When he found out I didn't follow the Lectionary, he spent five minutes before his sermon rattling on me, explaining what the Lectionary is and why I should be preaching from it.

No one said anything to me about it though. He gave a wonderful sermon and lectures on the living Jesus and I think that was all anyone wanted to talk about.

Well, today Dr. Johnson would be pleased with me because I will preach on all four of today's readings. The passages are listed at the end of a bulletin note. Not wanting to overwhelm you with four readings, I will read only two. Our Old Testament Lesson comes from Deuteronomy:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish;



you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. *Choose life* so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Our New Testament lesson comes from First Corinthians:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field. [You are] God's building.

As our *Call to Worship*, we used the Lectionary's Psalm reading which begins by saying "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who keep God's laws and who seek him with their whole heart, who do no wrong but walk in his ways." Basically, the Psalm's beginning is a beatitude—a blessing: "Happy are those who do what Moses just told us to do."

To know what Moses told us to do, all you need to do is read 22 chapters of instruction in the book of Deuteronomy. In those chapters, Moses taught wilderness wanderers *how to behave*. He taught them how to behave after they cross the Jordan River and become a settled people in the land they would inherit.<sup>1</sup>

If you read his teaching, you'll see that the instruction he gave is not unlike how many of us were taught to behave as children. I'll use my own experience, which I bet is a lot like some of yours. Moses teaches about worship. So did my mom. Dad was preaching so she taught me how to dress for church and how to behave *in* church. She couldn't make me listen to my father's sermons, but she could make me sit quietly (or try). When it came time to sing, she ran her finger along the verses until I learned to follow on my own. She taught me when to stand and when to sit, and she let me put money in the offering plate when it was passed down the aisle. If I didn't behave, I could expect at least a thump in the back of my head or, worse, a lecture when we got home.

Moses told the wanderers how they are to worship. His specific instructions were different than much of what Mom taught. We don't offer burnt offerings today, but the spirit is the same. Moses wanted his people to not miss the opportunity of the Sabbath to worship. He wanted the

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<sup>1</sup> Dean McBride describes chapter 4 through chapter 28 as a kind of "polity, to use church language, or a kind of "constitution," to use political language.



people to put God first, to come to worship ready to pray and to give, and to do so with a deep sense of awe and a readiness to hear something specific about God's claim on their lives.

My parents also taught me how to behave *outside* of church. They taught me what could get me arrested: murder, stealing, not obeying street signs. They also taught me personal ethics: what it is that Andersons just do not do. Andersons are Christian, they told me, so Andersons don't lie, cheat, steal... I lied a lot till I gave it up in Middle School, but I knew it was wrong. And there are certain things that Andersons *are* to do; speak to elders with respect, do your chores, help others when they need help.

And so it was with Moses. Read his instructions and you see that he talks about what would get his people in trouble in court and what can get them in trouble with family and neighbors. He included things like

lying under oath,  
stealing what belongs to others,  
violating relationship boundaries,  
gossip that hurts another's reputation,  
cleaning out your field at harvest so there is nothing left for the starving,  
or taking someone's tools as collateral for a loan  
because then they can't work to repay it.

In this realm of ethical behavior,

while there are some differences between then and now, it is striking about how most things haven't changed... or *shouldn't* have changed:

Don't lie,  
don't cheat,  
don't steal,  
don't kill,  
don't hurt another just to benefit yourself.

We should also note the threats. That's not something we do in a Presbyterian Church very often. Every Sunday in worship, we follow the *Prayer of Confession* with an *Assurance of Pardon* letting us know that our sins will not be held against us. You heard Moses. He was not so quick to offer that assurance. God may ultimately be the one who reconciles sinners, maybe even the entire creation, but Moses wanted to be clear that there are life consequences for bad and good behavior. Remember my mother's head thump if I misbehaved in church? Moses was *all about the thump*. Live right; you will live well. Live wrong; you'll suffer the consequences and they can be harsh.

Are these threats necessary? They shouldn't be. Moses himself said they shouldn't be. In his sermon he said that people are to love God with all their heart, soul and strength and he referred to that commandment in our passage. Love *should* be the motivation for right living. But Moses understood human nature far too well to believe that people's hearts can be washed as clean as newly fallen snow and stay that way. Pride, shame, greed, arrogance and cruelty stain so easily and they are stains that are hard to wash out of the fabric of hearts.

*"They stain even your children and grandchildren,"* Moses says.



“They can ruin an entire community,” he says.

“They can ruin a nation,” he says,

so remember that when you become a nation and don’t let lust for power and wealth make you *forget who you are*.

Or, there will be consequences.

Whew, good thing we aren’t stuck with the Law of the Old Testament, but have the grace and forgiveness of the New Testament, right? Good thing we are not stuck with Moses but have Jesus.

Well, before we jump too quick to an *Assurance of Pardon*, we might want to listen to our Gospel Lesson. In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus is preaching a teaching sermon based on Moses’ teaching sermon, and his expectations are even higher and his threats more dire.

Jesus’ expectations are higher because he not only expects his followers to *act* right, but to *be* right. He wants *unstained* hearts, so that Moses’ greatest commandment be kept; that God be loved with all one’s heart, soul and strength. Jesus piles on even with that commandment because he adds loving God with one’s mind as well.

Jesus knows that faith can be about appearances, and he is concerned that we not only do what is right when everyone is looking and you might get in trouble. He wants us to do what is right even when we are alone with only our conscience to guide us. For instance,

- Jesus says, “**You have heard it said** (and he is talking about Moses), **‘You shall not murder.’ I tell you, that you are not even to be angry.**”
- Jesus says, “**You have heard not to speak harshly about another. I’m telling you that if you defame another, you should fear the fires of hell.**” (Yeah, Jesus says that. And when he’s not threatening the fires of **Hell**, he is threatening **prison**).
- Jesus says, “**If you come to worship wanting to get right with God and you are not right with a brother or sister, then leave your gift at the altar and go work it out. You are not right with God if you are not right within the community.**”
- Jesus says, “**You have heard to not commit adultery, but I’m telling you not even to lust.**”
- And Jesus wants his hearers to stand behind what they promise. “**Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No.**” Otherwise, he says, “**you’re just doing the devil’s work.**”

I’ll admit that part of me likes what Jesus is saying, because I really don’t like it when people talk and act in ways that hurt others, especially when they do it to make themselves look better, to pad their pockets or increase their power. But then I *remember the stains*. Millie and I loved a bedspread. I accidentally spilled shoe polish on it and we threw it away. *I’m loved*, but *I’m stained*, and I don’t want to be *thrown away*.

So to hear Jesus channel not only Moses’ instructions but also his threats and warnings? Hell? Prison?

This is the place in the sermon where a good Presbyterian pastor who believes in God’s grace might jump to the resurrection and say that in the end God’s will to reconcile is stronger than



our will to sin, that we all fall short of Jesus' expectations but God forgives even those who crucify his son. But, if I am to truly remain within the wisdom of our Lectionary passages, today is not that Sunday. Neither Moses nor Jesus want us always to jump so quickly to our own personal *Assurance of Pardon* and the affirmation that "All will be well." Their love for their people doesn't keep them from making clear that good and evil have consequences.

The Apostle Paul makes that clear on our passage from I Corinthians. Paul is all about grace. He is all about people following the Law of Love rather than being captive to the fear of consequences. But he is why theologians talk about justification (saved by grace) and sanctification (grow in grace). In our passage, he is telling Corinthian Christians who have been justified to be sanctified. He's telling them to grow up.

Here's the situation: The Corinthian Christians have declared their faith in God and have committed their lives to following Jesus.

They *want* to be kind,  
and they want to be kind for kindness' sake.  
They *want* to be just for justice' sake  
and, yes, they *want* to be good for goodness' sake.

But they can't always pull it off. They are Christian, but they are human, too. Parties have formed within the Corinthian community. "We follow Paul," say some. "We follow Apollos," say others. In taking sides against each other, it is not really about Paul and Apollos who both are about building the church, but about their own immaturity. They are acting like children.

Before anyone takes offense on behalf of children and protest that Jesus said that we must be like children to enter the kingdom of God, you know what Paul is saying. He is not talking about childlike curiosity, trust, wonder and willingness to imagine and believe. He is talking about childishness which adults often can pull off better than children; talking and acting as if they hadn't been *taught* better.

The way Paul says it is this: "You're still not ready for solid food. You are supposed to have each other's best interests at heart, but instead there is jealousy, quarreling, and unkindness among you." It is not in our passage, but Paul later tells them in this same letter that when he was a child, he thought and acted like a child, but in growing up he gave up childish ways. He even riffs on Moses' and Jesus' greatest commandment to love, saying that love isn't *feeling*, it is *doing*. It is not being jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude; or rejoicing in the wrong. It is rejoicing in the right... and doing it: being patient, being kind; and never stopping being kind and patient.

The common theme I found in all four of the passages is what I am calling today "*spiritual maturity*." I suggest that given the guidance of our passages there are stages of spiritual maturity.

Stage 1: **Do what is right or be punished.** I could talk about Martin Luther's *Civil Use of the Law* and his theological belief that those who do not know God need to know that they can't get away with harming others. Instead, I will quote his namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr., who



illustrated the point when he said, “It may be true that the **law** cannot make a man **love** me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important.”

Stage 2: **Do what is right because you *want* to do what is right.**

Isn't that what Jesus said? Let good actions flow from good hearts? It is not enough that we should do the right thing because we're scared of getting into trouble if we don't, but *our* minds, and hearts, and wills, should become the mind, heart and will of *Christ*. So, when we see suffering,

a converted heart should want to do something to relieve the suffering.  
when we see that there is a problem between us and a brother, or sister, or neighbor,  
we could want to do what we can to heal that breach.  
and even when it seems no one is watching, or we can get away with it,  
we should find it repellent to tell the lie,  
or cheat,  
or spread gossip that harms another's reputation.

Stage 3: **Do what is right *because* it is right, even when you don't want to.**

But why? Why does it matter when God is a God of Grace?

It matters because there are **consequences**.

God may forgive, but we can harm.

God may heal, but we can wound.

God may reconcile, but we can break other people's hearts...

and sometimes when we get out of hand,

break other people's lives.

But,

- when we live in a way that follows Moses' and Jesus' instructions because we are afraid not to,
  - or better, we do what is right because we *want* to,
  - or, when necessary, do what is right because it is right whether we *want* to or not,
- blessings come: the blessings of healing and making lives and communities whole.

God wills our forgiveness. But, as the coming sermon series on *The Lord's Prayer* will make clear: God does want on earth what God enjoys in heaven. The expectations are high, because the consequences here on earth can be so dire.

