



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Deacon Ryan Hall
Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10
St. Mark's on the Campus
July 15, 2007

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Psalm 25, Colossians 1:1-14, Gospel: Luke 10: 25-37

“Echoes of Shema”

This will no doubt come as a shock to all of you, but most American church goers today are probably not all that thrilled about the themes in scriptures we have from the Lectionary. There's all this talk about “The Law” and “obedience” and perhaps even worse a story about Jesus arguing with a lawyer, and everyone knows how much Americans love lawyers.

So, what are we to make of the lessons for today? What of this thing we call “The Law”?

We in the Modern west hear the term “The Law” in a much more negative light than the original audience would have understood the term. “Law” to us usually means rules to be obeyed, dictated to us for, at least in theory, the common good. The Law is a list of things we can and cannot do because laws, at least in much of Western political theory, exist only as a negation of our freedom.

Likewise, we Americans hear the term “obedience” in an even more negative way. Americans brought up in the ways rugged individualism do not like being obedient. We view obedience as following and obeying blindly and without question. We like power, we like choice, we don't like people telling us what to do because we like doing whatever we want because we feel secure in our money, power, and bombs. Obedience is no exactly something that rebellious American culture holds up as a virtue.

As dangerous as that attitude against obedience can be in its extreme form, there is some wisdom in this point of view, however. We should not blindly follow orders; We should not be simply obedient to evil forces at work in the world if we do, indeed, have the power to stop them.

With that background, again I ask the question: What of this thing we call “The Law”? With our rather jaded Western view of “The Law,” what are we as 21st century Christians to make of this section of scripture. Is God calling us to obedience to follow a mere set of laws or Holier-than-thou commandments, relics from another religious era?

A perfect example of my own misunderstanding about anything having to do with “The Law” happened to me last fall. I was on an airplane and happened to be sitting next to a Jewish man, I believe he was a rabbi, who happened to be diligently reading his scriptures in Hebrew. Part way through the flight, I happened to lean over and ask him what he was reading. I explained that I was in seminary. He looked at me somewhat dubiously, but finally said, Do you read Hebrew?” I responded that I knew a little, and also made some offhanded comment that in seminary, you have to take at least one course in a “dead language” in preparation for scripture courses.

By dead language, I meant languages that are no longer actually spoken like Latin or in this instance Biblical Hebrew. Boy, was that the wrong thing to say! This gentleman told me in no uncertain terms (he was quite adamant in fact) that, “Hebrew is not a dead language! The Torah (what we call “the Law”) is written in Hebrew, and it is a living word!”

By this point, people on the plane were turning around and staring at us. I sort of smiled and nodded to them to reassure them because get jittery on airplanes these days after 9/11. But I got the point. These commandments, what we Christians like to call “The Law” is not really Law at all, its Teaching with a capital T, a living, life giving teaching.

To further understand this, perhaps we should hear the opening words, the Teaching, that is said to this day in Jewish worship services

“Hear on Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One.”

This phrase is the beginning part of what is called The Great *Shema*, which in Hebrew means “to hear” and serves as a form of calling the people to again remember, to 'Hear oh Israel: the Lord your God, the lord is One' for this is the basic tenet of the Law, the Teaching...of the Jewish faith for if you hear it in its entirety, the *Shema* contains the teaching about living with all your heart and mind, which is what the lawyer is quoting from today in the gospel we heard.

Likewise, in the reading from Deuteronomy, we hear Moses preaching his final sermon to the Israelites before they enter the promise land which Moses himself will never get to see. This sermon echoes the *Shema*, for Moses is trying one last time to make sure that Israel hears and not simply obeys. For to simply follow and not hear and understand a Teaching is to have a set of teachings that the people will soon forget.

It is this *Torah*, this Teaching, that Jesus and the Lawyer are debating about in the gospel story we heard, but The Law they were debating about means something much different than what we in the modern era hear when someone refers to “The Law.”

And yet for all our qualms and scruples about the term, God calls us, just as he calls the Ancient people of Israel, to obedience. Not obedience to follow laws blindly to recreate a Neolithic Moral utopia, and not to an obedience to that would lead us to set ourselves above the word because we follow this particular law and *those people* do not.

You know what I mean when I say, somewhat sardonically, *those people*...

...*those people* not like ourselves,
...*those people* we do not like,
...*those people* that make us uncomfortable,
...*those people* who we wish would just go away.

It is exactly this notion of those people that both Moses and Jesus were trying to avoid in the Teachings from the readings today. It was the Samaritans of Jesus' day that were those people to the Jews of Palestine. The Samaritans did not worship at the temple, *those people* had a different name for God, and *those people* did not follow the Law like they should.

No, God calls us to a different form of obedience, to be obedient in hearing and not merely following, to be obedient in doing, and not merely watching. It is a call to comprehend the Teaching of what God is speaking to us through His Word so that when we come face to face with our own personal Samaritan, whether that be a homeless man, an illegal immigrant, or whomever it may be that does not look, or does not smell, or (heaven forbid!) does not vote like us, we may hear those echoes of *Shema*.

An echo that comes not from the reflection of the noise returning to us from the sound of our own voices (something I think we often too proud Americans are good at generating), but this sound, this echo, emanates from the God of unparalleled mercy. A God who is still calling us

to show mercy to our neighbors, *those people* whom we want to desperately believe are not like ourselves, because this Law...this Teaching...this Living Word that Moses and Jesus were trying to convey was about loving *not* ourselves, but loving *of* ourselves.

May we always remember that God is calling us to hear the echoes of Shema in our own time and in our own way, or as our Lord Jesus Christ, himself quoting from the *Shema*, says in the Summary of the Law that is read at the beginning of the Rite I Eucharistic Service: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they hear, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. For upon these two commandments hang all *the Law* and the Prophets.”

So, as it was to the Israelites on the plains of the Promise land and to the man helped the Good Samaritan in today's Gospel reading, may we hear that living word of *Shema* so that, as it says in Deuteronomy today, “may this Word be very near us” so that we may have life.

Amen.