

“Hot Potato Texts: The Rules of Leviticus”

Leviticus 11: 1-23
“Odd Laws Still on the Books”
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I had an interesting experience Friday night in relation to my sermon today. Recently I discovered that a childhood friend had moved and was living in Seattle. I have known my friend, Scott, since fifth grade. He was best man at my wedding and I was best man at his wedding some 25 years ago. The last time I saw him was in 2001 and the last time I heard from him was later that year when he got sick. Somehow we lost touch after that. We both had moved and despite attempts to locate each other it wasn't until we both ended up on the social networking site, Facebook, that we rediscovered each other.

Friday night we met in Olympia half way between our homes for a nice Italian dinner, a bottle of wine, and nearly four hours of playing catch up. Scott picked the restaurant out because eight years ago when he was sick it was discovered that he had celiac disease. Before they had discovered it he was down to 115 pounds, being fed by a feeding tube, and had a large portion of his intestine removed. It turns out none of that would have been necessary if they had just figured out that he had celiac disease and removed all gluten from his diet.

As I said on Friday night Scott picked the restaurant. He had gone online and discovered that this particular restaurant was famous for its gluten-free menu. In fact, the waiter commented that people will come in and say, “*Is this the famous gluten-free restaurant?*” And he always replies, “*No, this is the famous Italian Ristorante known for its gluten-free menu.*” We sat down and both Mary Kay, his wife, and I ordered wonderful-sounding pasta dishes. Scott was given a different menu, a more pure menu, with just as many choices of gluten-free entrees. The rest of the night we went through this ritual of making sure his food fit the strict codes of his diet.

I am preaching a series during Lent called “Hot Potato Texts.” I am actually very excited about this because these are the texts in the Bible that we tend to skip over. For one reason or another they either are too confusing, don't seem relevant or are simply too controversial for pastors to feel comfortable addressing them. The rules of Leviticus are one. Next week I will do my best to tackle some of the strange visions of Revelations. We are going to get right into the “R rated” book of the Song of Solomon. I want to address some of those texts where it says that God orders the slaying and destruction of cities and people. And finally, on Women's Appreciation Sunday, I want to play with those rather convenient texts that say, “*Women should remain silent in church.*” It should be a fun and enlightening series.

I think this is important to do because we Presbyterians say that we believe in the whole Bible. We believe in the totality of the Bible, yet we have books we never crack open. Even with this, most of us would be uncomfortable if we said, “*The Sermon on the Mount is in and Leviticus is out.*” Even though we rarely even acknowledge certain books of the Bible—Malachi, Zephaniah, Titus, or Philemon—we would be uncomfortable if someone took their scissors and played cut and paste with their favorite verses.

We say we believe in the whole, but the truth is we don't take all of it very seriously. We say that all of scripture is inspired by God, but we try to avoid certain texts like the plague. I want to break through our discomfort with parts of the Bible today. The fact of the matter is all of the books that were chosen to be in the Bible in 375 C.E. were chosen for a reason. The

problem is not whether they should have been chosen or not. The problem is we just haven't been taught how to read the Bible.

Leviticus is a great example. Today, in the reading we have the Lord speaking to Moses and Aaron establishing very specific rules about what can be eaten and what can't be eaten. They use the language of what's "clean" and what's "unclean." This language gives us a window into why we have such a hard time understanding the relevance of these texts. I mean, seriously, has anyone of you ever thumbed through Leviticus to decide what you were going to cook for dinner? Has anyone of you suddenly become deliriously delighted that the Bible actually says it's okay to eat locusts, crickets and grasshoppers? Just wait until your 4-year old pulls that one on, "But, mom the Bible says I can eat grasshoppers!"

Leviticus is written as if it is taking place during the time of the wandering in the wilderness after the great Exodus—sometime after the Ten Commandments and before the crossing of the Jordan. But, scholars believe it was actually written during the Babylonian exile around 586 B.C.E. It captures the period of wandering in the wilderness, but is written hundreds of years later. Why is this important? Because the issues of the Babylonian exile forced the Israelites to set up very specific rules about their life in order to keep their culture from dying off.

We all see this in our own community. We have thousands of first and second generation immigrants moving into our community. One of the things you will find is that immigrants work extra hard at guarding and protecting their ethnic identity. Their hardest struggle is with trying to pass their heritage down to their children who are born in the United States. They try to enforce dress codes. They take every opportunity they can to cook and eat the ethnic food of their culture. They speak their native language in their own homes. This is what it was like for those Israelites in the Babylonian exile. They were in a foreign land and they were trying to hold onto their culture, to keep it from dying.

This whole language around food that is "clean" and "unclean" comes from what are called purity codes. It has nothing to do with food that is either healthy or unhealthy for you. It is all about holding onto their culture. It was about being able to say to their children, "*You are different. You are not like those Babylonians. We order from a different menu of life.*"

What really excites me about this is that Leviticus is just as important for our faith as the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount. The problem is we just don't know how to read this stuff. We are so used to looking at a text and taking it at face value that we find ourselves either following it or dismissing it. When it comes to loving our neighbors we tend to think that following it is a good idea. When it comes to eating grasshoppers we tend to dismiss it. But, when we do that we are relegating a part of the Bible to the dust heap of our faith. And there is nothing in our tradition that says that we ought to start dismissing parts of the Bible as no longer relevant.

The fact of the matter is that Leviticus is highly relevant to us. But, its relevance is not found in the answers that it proposes, but in the questions that it is asking. The answers are you can eat cows, but pigs and camels are not allowed. You can eat grasshoppers, but horseflies are off the menu. The answers hold little relevance for us in our time. But, the questions behind those answers get at the heart of our faith. "How do we hold onto who we are in a foreign culture?" "How do we maintain our covenant with God when we are challenged by the culture around us?" "What do we need to do to pass on our tradition and our beliefs to the next generation?" "What is the legacy we are going to leave after we are gone?" Those are the questions being asked in Leviticus and, guess what, they are same questions we are asking today.

Leviticus is very much like those “Odd Laws Still on the Books” that I read earlier. The laws themselves seem to make very little sense to us. *“It’s illegal to whistle underwater.” “Chicken can’t lay eggs before 8:00 a.m. and after 4:00 p.m.” “A man must have a permit to shave.” “Fire departments must practice for 15 minutes before fighting a fire.” “Clergy can’t tell a joke from the pulpit.”* Like Leviticus these laws seem to make absolutely no sense to us. But, if you were to probe the questions those communities were asking at the time of the laws you would begin to see the wisdom. In almost every case you would find a valid reason. You would discover that the law had something to do with sanitation issues. You might find it was a way to promote the values of their community. Maybe it was a way to keep order. In the case of the clergy telling jokes it was likely an attempt to maintain a spirit of reverence in worship. We may not agree with the law, but we do agree that keeping reverence is important.

Friday night three of us sat down for an evening of good food, good wine and conversation. My friend, Scott, ordered from a different menu, the gluten-free menu. Someday, archeologists will discover that menu and wonder why there was a small sect of people who followed a very rigid diet. And they will wonder whether their culture should be following the same diet. But, the issue is not what you eat, but why you eat what you eat. And for Scott and others who have celiac disease they eat what they eat to stay alive.

2600 years ago the Israelites found themselves exiled in a foreign land and they did the same thing. In order to survive, in order to keep their culture alive, in order to pass their tradition down to their children they developed purity codes. They wrote down a whole list of purity codes that told them who they were, that told them how they were different from the culture around them. And they put it in a special menu made just for them. Today we call it Leviticus.

We Presbyterians believe in the whole of the Bible. Even the parts where it says we can eat grasshoppers.