

FREE FROM FEAR

Leviticus 26:13-23

This Book of Leviticus was probably written about 250 years after the reign of King David, so it is fairly late compared to other books of the Torah. It contains all those boring laws and some beautiful poetry. In fact the same priestly authors who wrote this book also gave us the poetry that starts the Book of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The laws in Leviticus are easy to mock. Maybe you have seen the open letter to Dr. Laura from James Kauffman. Apparently, she said on her radio show that as an orthodox Jew she cannot condone homosexuality because of Leviticus 18:22. James Kauffman asks her to clarify points about some other regulations, for instance: “When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord. The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?...I know that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?...My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair, like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws?”

Here's a common question these days, "What's in it for me?" This little passage toward the end of the Holiness Code in Leviticus provides a Biblical answer. What's in it for me? What do I get out of it? You get prosperity. You get peace. You get freedom from fear. Pretty good deal. Prosperity, peace, freedom from fear.

The priestly description of these blessings is pure poetry. It follows the creative writing maxim: "show don't tell."

Here's how the author shows us what prosperity looks like: the right amount of rain at the right time, rich soil, abundant harvest.

Do you know any farmers? Ever hear them say that the weather's been just right? All the farmers I know are sure that if the yield is too good, then prices will be down. You've got to be an optimist to save up part of your food for seed and then put it in the ground and hope to get more in a few months, but most of the farmers I know are "glass half empty" kind of people. There's always something to complain about. Here in Leviticus the promise to farmers is consistently rich harvest. "You shall eat old grain long kept, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new." You will be so confident of your prosperity that you will eat all those frozen dinners in your freezer. My parents used to keep an extraordinary amount of canned food on hand. They were children of the Depression; "put something away because you might run out." But the promise of God we read today says that you can forget about filling up the pantry. In fact you'll have to throw away all those canned goods to make way for the fresh food. There's always going to be plenty. You won't need to save up for the future, you won't need that 401k because you've got "Social Security" that is guaranteed by God Almighty instead of backed up by the full faith and credit

of the United States Treasury. Which would you rather trust for your future prosperity: the Lord God, or the United States Congress.

Here's what peace looks like: "you'll be able to sleep deeply without posting a guard, you won't have to worry about wild animals, your enemies will run away when they see you." "Five of you will chase a hundred and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand."

One of the rabbinic commentators looks closely at this assertion and raises a question about the math. 5 is to 100 as 100 is to 10,000. The arithmetic is a little faulty. But the commentator won't accept that the author couldn't do math. Here's the subtlety of this promise: "the bigger your community of faith, the greater the power of the whole." It's not just the sum of the parts, the power of the community grows geometrically. Church growth is important. Poetry.

Here's what freedom from fear looks like: "no one will make you afraid." "I have freed you from slavery, I broke the bars of the yoke that they used to make you work like an animal, I made you stand up straight and walk proud with your shoulders back and your head held high."

Prosperity, peace, freedom from fear. In a certain sense, the first two are just specific examples of the last one. Prosperity means being free from the fear of doing without, and peace means being free from the fear of threats both foreign and domestic.

It's a big promise—remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve ate the apple and became self-aware creatures knowing good and evil. They decided that they really ought to get dressed and then God comes around to visit. God says to Adam, "Where are you?" and Adam says, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid for I was naked." Fear and shame were the first emotions expressed

in the relationship between God and free people. Remember the story of Moses and the burning bush? God says: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. The Psalms are full of references to “fear of God.” Sometimes we will endorse someone’s character by saying that he is a “God-fearing Christian.” Religion is full of fear. In the Bible study class a couple of weeks ago, someone said that religion is all about fear. We fear privation, we fear the unknown, we fear death, we fear the possibility of unknown privations after death and so we turn to religion to control our fear.

What are you afraid of?

There are levels of fear. I don’t mean those things that we’re just sort of “concerned about.” A homeowner might say, “I’m afraid the house might burn down so I’ve got some fire extinguishers and some home owner’s insurance and I pay taxes so the fire department will put the fire out if my fear comes true.” I don’t mean that kind of fear. That’s the kind of fear you can do something about. You can take some precautions: buckle your seat belts, don’t play in the street, leave a light on. These are fears but they’re just little things. I’m asking you, **WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?**

Some psychologists say that we have a few innate fears: loud noises, falling, bright lights, sudden motion, separation from nurturing parents. I’m not talking about those fears either. I’m talking about the big stuff that you don’t outgrow. What are you afraid of?

We can describe fear physiologically. Tense muscles, shallow breathing, focused concentration, perspiration, adrenaline pumped into the blood stream, change in the perception of time. Sometimes paralysis—you know the “deer in the headlights” feeling comes over us. What are you

afraid of? Levels of fear can go from concern to anxiety to dread to trepidation to panic to terror. Some fears are totally irrational. The diagnostic and statistical manual lists scores of phobias. Some people are so deathly afraid of other people that they can't go out in public. I've known people so afraid of water that they would not bathe. I worked with the family of a college student who was petrified that he might catch sight of someone disabled using a wheelchair or crutches or braces, so he could not leave the house even though he had a promising athletic career and he lost his scholarship because of his fear.

When I was a graduate student several of us worked with a patient who was terrified of playing piano in public. We used deep muscle relaxation, progressive guided imagery with hierarchies of anxiety to help him defeat the phobia. It took about six months to teach him to overcome the fear of playing piano in public. At his first concert after the therapy we were surprised to discover that no one had taken the time to teach him to actually play the piano. But he pounded the keyboard in public with no fear!

I've got a couple of fears myself. Heights are really hard for me. And snakes. I can remember back in 3rd or 4th grade going to my cousin's house and we would go out in the woods and catch dozens of garter snakes. So this is a fear that I've picked up since then. If there's a picture of a snake in a book or a movie or a tv show, I have to turn away. I don't go to the herpetology house at the zoo. I get all those symptoms of fear just thinking about snakes. So I don't think about them. Great prophets, saints and religious heroes inspire us to overcome our fears: Martin Luther King, Ghandi. Personally, I prefer St. Patrick, he chased the snakes out of Ireland. There's a hero. He ought to have a cathedral or something named after him.

How about you, what are you afraid of? Death, disease, loss.

I'm guessing that some of you have some level of fear about looking into this book of Leviticus. Some maybe out of a fear of boredom, but others because it contains so many ancient rules and regulations that have been miss-applied in modern times to justify hatred and prejudice against LGBT people. Somehow I took comfort from a reference in a commentary on this book of Torah. The Jewish scholar who wrote the commentary said that despite the harsh laws about sexual practice, he could find no incidence in the pre-Christian era when the law and its prescribed punishment were actually enforced. It is only in the Christian era that this law has been activated.

These great promises of God to provide prosperity and peace and freedom from fear are only half of the story. You see, Leviticus makes these promises conditionally. They are the greatest pie in the sky by and by promises since the Nixon campaign. You haven't heard such a rosy description of how great life could be since your brother-in-law started selling Amway. Prosperity, peace, and freedom from fear (and here God puts a big comma!), “IF YOU FOLLOW MY STATUTES

AND KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS AND OBSERVE THEM FAITHFULLY!” IF! IF! IF! COMMA, COMMA, COMMA, THEN YOU WILL GET THE BLESSINGS OF PROSPERITY AND PEACE AND FREEDOM FROM FEAR.

In this Book of Leviticus, right after the description of the great blessings for following the Law, comes the description of the great

punishments for not following the Law. The poetry is no less impressive and subtle. These verses follow our Scripture lesson for today. Here's what it says. If you don't follow the commandments, you will be subject to famine and disease, "I will bring terror on you," says the 16th verse. The priestly author uses vivid imagery to show what the consequences will be: "I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper. Your strength shall be spent to no purpose,...your roads shall be deserted. Ten women will bake your bread in a single oven and they shall dole out your bread by weight." Think about that bread image. If ten women can bake bread in a single oven, it's pretty small bread. And why dole out the bread by weight? The Torah commentary says, because the bread will be of such poor quality that it will not bind together to become a loaf. It will be a pile of crumbs to divide amongst the starving.

Imagine the fears and phobias that torment people who embrace this conditional, "If...then" kind of structure to their lives.

Oh, we do it all the time. In a way it is human nature, it's hardwired into the nature of life. The organism that is better adapted to its environment has a better chance to extend its DNA to another generation. A chicken is just an egg's way of making another egg. If an organism is good at extending its DNA to the next generation, it will thrive and its rivals will fade to oblivion. If...then. Conditional.

We use these principles to raise children: If you clean up your plate, you can have some dessert. If you don't share your toys, I'll have to send you to timeout. Sometimes parents resort to big promises and dire threats to raise children. We legislate morality all the time. We use conditional love all the time. "If you buy my product, I will provide you happiness." "If you vote for me, I will provide prosperity." "If you don't respect my gang, I will

make your neighborhood unlivable.” “If you don’t follow my principles of government or religion, I will terrorize your people.”

We use fear, threat of punishment, to control others. Fear of the consequences of violating law is the basis for every legal restriction from the Book of Leviticus to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” from the Ten Commandments to the United States Constitution.

It isn’t surprising that people embrace conditional love like it is described in Leviticus. What is surprising is that any alternative to conditional love exists at all. We all know about conditional love, and we Christians—and some others (we don’t have an exclusive on this ideal) have heard about unconditional love. It’s harder. Unconditional love is much harder. It’s an ideal. We don’t see much of it in nature. We see some acts of altruism, but that’s a little different from unconditional love. Here’s one of my favorite stories about unconditional love. You may have heard it before, but I want to hear it again so I’ll tell it anyway. I think it was the late Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame University. At a press conference after the announcement of a new football coach Father Hesburgh was asked what he thought of the new coach. “Oh, I love him. Love him like a brother, love him unconditionally,” said Hesburgh. Then the follow up question: “What if the team loses nine games next season, will you still love him?” “Oh yes,” said the good father, “I’ll still love him. I’ll miss him, but I’ll still love him.”

Unconditional love doesn’t have much of an answer to the question, “What’s in it for me?” We don’t get much for it but an inner satisfaction that we are fulfilling the call that brings us together in this church. We know there are things that make us afraid. We strive for the ideal anyway. Our answer to Leviticus comes from the First Letter of John, chapter 4, verse 18:

it goes like this, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” We haven’t yet attained the ideal, but let’s keep trying to love our fears away.

Will you pray with me?