

Weekly Reading – Tuesday, July 6, 2010

We are looking now at the lessons for Sunday, July 11, 2010, which is the fifteen Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 10. The epistle readings, having concluded a series in Galatians, open a new series from Colossians. And I am looking at the typological Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy rather than semi-continuous choice which is from Amos.

Deuteronomy 30: 9 - 14

Perhaps it is useful to be reminded that Deuteronomy is pretty much an extended sermon, exhortative in tone, attributed to Moses. It is set at the River Jordan, a kind of commencement address to the people of Israel who have completed their forty year curriculum in the wilderness and now enter into a new life in the promised land. The first two verses remind Israel of the conditional nature of the covenant: keep God's ways and commandments and it shall be well with you. Then, as if anticipating some complaint that God's ways are difficult if not impossible to know, Moses says, "Not so. You don't have to ascend to heaven to know God's will, nor travel far to mysterious lands. God's ways and will are "very near." They are "in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." Perhaps we make God more hidden and inscrutable than God ever intended! The connection to the Gospel reading is clear. There the question is, "Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer who asks that question of Jesus wants to make the matter more complex than God does.

Colossians 1: 1 - 14

Since this is the first of a series of readings from the letter of Paul to the church at Colosse, it may be worthwhile to set the context just a bit. What's at stake here? The issue is a quite contemporary one. Is Christ a really good man, another exemplary figure alongside others, and a great teacher? Or is Christ something more and different, somehow unique and at the center of God's plan and purpose? These are tough but urgent questions, and as I say quite contemporary. But Paul doesn't get to these questions right off the bat. Rather he warms up the conversation and prepares the ground by establishing his relationship and affection for the people of the church at Colosse. Paul begins by speaking of his gratitude for the Colossians and of his prayers for them. Only in the concluding verses do readers begin to get a hint of the overall theme as Paul speaks in vs. 13 - 14 of Christ's rescue mission and redemption. This is a good way to preach and to minister. Start by building relationship, building trust, establishing a bond. No effective pastor fails to build this foundation or to continue to attend to it as their work unfolds.

Luke 10: 25 - 27

Perhaps the most well-known and popular of Jesus' parables, the "Parable of the Good Samaritan." But sometimes those things and people we are so certain we know well, we in fact don't know that well. We only think we do. Herein lies the

challenge for the preacher. To break through the haze of familiarity. "Parable of the Good Samaritan? Oh yeah, we know that one. Help your neighbor. Help those in need." Well, that's true of course and there's nothing wrong, and quite a lot right with that summary and message. God's will is at least sometimes, as the Deuteronomy lesson suggests, as plain as the nose on your face. And yet, there is a surprise and a twist here which will reward preachers and congregations who pay deeper attention. It comes in the juxtaposition of two words that Jesus' Jewish contemporaries would never have put alongside one another, "good" and "Samaritan." The two didn't go together much better than "good communist," or "good Al-Quaeda member" do for us. In other words, Samaritans were "not good." They were heretics and half-breeds. They were from the wrong neighborhood. If you're a liberal, they are conservatives. If you are a Republican, they are Democrats or vice-versa. So the fact that we have a "good Samaritan" is a mind blower. Especially given the fact that the other candidates for doing the right thing are "good Jews," who walk on by on the other side. The person who does the right thing is the unexpected person, the wrong person. One imagines the beaten man saying, "Oh God, not you. Anybody but a Samaritan! I'd rather die here, than be helped by a Samaritan." A further move, that links, this parable to the Colossians reading then would be to speak of the radical move of God to come to us in the form of a crucified and despised Savior. Such a turn deepens the familiar parable. Instead of simply saying, "Be a good Samaritan, help out those in need," it becomes, "Love others as God in Christ has, so unexpectedly and scandalously, loved you."