

Weekly Reading – Monday, October 20, 2008

We now turn to the lessons for Sunday, October 26, 2008. In some traditions this last Sunday in October is Reformation Sunday. It is also the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, and Proper 25.

Leviticus 19: 1 - 2, 15 – 18

This reading comes from the Levitical Holiness Code, a key source of the moral imagination of Israel and the Church. It begins with the leitmotif of the Code, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." This will be echoed many places in the New Testament as for example in I Peter, "You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation." The code then goes on to specify in what holiness consists, and generally tracks the dual emphasis of the Decalogue on love of God and love of neighbor. The further verses of this lesson are drawn from a series of paired ethical teachings, that begin with verse 9 and continue through 18. So pair one of our reading, 15 -16, addresses partiality and slander. Then 17 - 18 focus on hate and vengeance. Note the way these Levitical teachings hold the tension of polarity. "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great," and "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor." The moral life is not made, or made to appear, simple. It is in such teachings complex!

I Thessalonians 2: 1 – 8

Here Paul reflects on his ministry among the Thessalonians, and on the nature of being an apostle. As he begins he references the wild time he had in Philippi, where a riot of the silversmiths aimed at Paul and his team, led to Paul's beating and imprisonment, though finally to his vindication and freedom. The point would be that Paul does not travel about attended by fanfare or wild, or even muted, popularity. Being an apostle of Jesus Christ and the gospel means challenging the powers that be as well as the conventional wisdom. This paves the way for Paul's emphasis on the source of his apostolic ministry and authority, as well as his accountability. All this is from God. ". . .even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts." This pretty much flies in the face of a good deal of recent homiletical theory which works overtime at "listener theory" and calculations of how to reach your listeners. I tend to think that the best way to reach listeners is by having something to say. This is not to say, however, that one should be or that Paul was indifferent to those who heard. Not at all. So in the concluding verses he speaks of his deep care, his sharing of himself, and in a remarkable image depicts his apostolic ministry is similar to a nursing mother.

Matthew 22: 34 – 46

Questions and answers, or questions and questions! This passage falls into two parts, all of it occurring in the tense and testy atmosphere of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. The Pharisees ask him which is the greatest commandment? (Hence the companion text from Leviticus). Jesus gives the headlines, as it were, over the two tablets of the Decalogue, "Love of God,"

and "Love of neighbor." In Luke this sets up the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its further exposition of "neighbor." But not in Matthew. In Matthew, where Jesus is in many ways the new Moses, the issues underlying these back and forths are two: authority, or the authority of Jesus, and obedience, the obedience of Israel and in particular the religious leaders. In the second part of the lesson Jesus appears to toy with his auditors, creating a logical conundrum regarding the question of the relationship of the Messiah to David. Jesus renders them speechless. The point? Is Jesus just tired of the crap? Probably but there has to be more to it than that. It seems, I would think, a call to the religious leaders to repent, to repent of their arrogance, their pretensions, their unteachable hearts. And indeed, the following reading, which we have for next week (Mt. 23: 1 - 12) challenges the religious leaders on just those grounds. Of course, the problem is that no one is "for" arrogance or pretense. But when we make ourselves, rather than God and what God has done and is doing in Christ, the focus its difficult to avoid such foibles and failures.