

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Other

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
May 29, 2011

Scripture Readings: Leviticus 25:8-14; Luke 4:16-19 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today we come to the last leg in what has become the longest sermon series I have ever done. There are 25 of them in all. We've looked at principles of spiritual sanity; we mentioned five of them, but each of them has five sermons. Now we're going to begin to discuss a principle that we might call the reciprocity principle. That principle states that religion that is sane is going to offer to outsiders every right that it claims for those within itself. One principle that grounds religion in sanity is that it's not like a cult in that it treats insiders differently than it treats the rest of the world. Genuine religion, sane religion, is universal; that is, it treats those outside its parameters with the same principles it claims for itself. Now, obviously, you don't see that very often.

Let me begin by saying something that those of you who have been here since I got here know to be true, but everybody else will not believe me; that when I graduated from Seminary, I didn't have one political bone in my body. It seems hard to believe. (*laughter*) But I was very much a traditional minister then. I thought that bringing politics into a sermon was mixing something with the Gospel that shouldn't be there. You should have religion over here and politics over there. I certainly understand that, having looked at things that way. I even looked at people like Gandhi apolitically; that is, I thought what he was saying was that we should all just be very, very nice. I saw nothing in Gandhi or Martin Luther King about challenging the structures of oppression. I just wanted to be nice.

Now this was very much in my interest, because what that meant was that in this system that gave me privilege for being male, for me to not want to talk about women's issues left me higher up on the totem pole. I didn't have to take responsibility for it; I was just being nice, right? I didn't want to upset anybody. In a culture that values being white over being a person of color, for me not to want to look at racial issues notched me up a little bit higher. To not want to look at the advantage that comes from being American and thinking of foreign policy in terms of what's best for *us*...I didn't want to look at that. I didn't want to look at what it means to be a Christian, and not stand up for Jewish people and Islamic people. So I was being very nice, but it profited me greatly. I stayed higher up on the pecking order.

I could have lived my life like that. All I had to do was keep saying I'm studying foreign policy by looking at the American press; that's all I had to do. If I wanted to understand the Arab's position on something, instead of listening to what the Arabs themselves are saying, all I had to do was look at what the New York Times has to say about it. And, by golly, it's exactly what I want it to be!

I could have spent my entire life studying Biblical commentaries from people inside the church, within the organization, but there was something haunting me. There was something that I could feel wasn't

right about how I was doing ethics. I believed in the Golden Rule, but the Golden Rule, as I understood it is, “Treat other people the way I want to be treated.” This is still using *me* as the measuring rod. If you want to understand American foreign policy, you can believe that we’re just helping people! We’re going out into the world and helping them to be better versions of ourselves, and the fact that we always end up with our pockets full of money, and we never leave without some of their stuff, is incidental. I was haunted by these voices from the outside.

The text we’re looking at today is Leviticus 25, and I encourage you - after church, not necessarily today - but sometime, to look at it. You probably don’t spend a lot of time in Leviticus, but look at Leviticus 25; what you will find there is a calling to Jubilee. We’ve looked at five things that Christianity pretends aren’t there, in its own foundation. One of these things is ignoring the message of Jubilee. [When that is done] it allows Christians to take advantage of other people and to feel that they’re better than other people. Jubilee requires a re-distribution of the goods.

People don’t want to see that. They’ll admit that yes, they saw Leviticus 25, they saw the Jubilee, but it seemed like it was an impossible standard, so they just go by it and it’s like it wasn’t even there. That’s what the nation of Israel did, that’s what the church has done. Jubilee basically forbids Capitalism. You’re not to charge interest to other people in a way that impoverishes them, and enslaves them. And once every fifty years, you re-distribute the wealth. If people are in prison, you release them at that time.

See, that’s revolutionary stuff. So it’s been hermetically sealed in Scripture, and we pretend like it isn’t even there. What I’ve discovered over the years is that it’s not enough to love other people as myself, which means to love you as another version of me; that’s not good enough. *What I need to learn to do is to love you for who you are, to love you as someone other than myself.*

One of the first principles of sanity is the Shema, “Love God with all your heart, all of your mind, all of your strength,” that’s the way we’ve translated it, which means that nobody can tell you what to think, nobody can tell you who to love, nobody can tell you what to do. That’s what the Shema would call us to...if we still remembered it. What Jubilee says is that you give that same gift to others. They get to love with all of *their* heart, they get to love with all of *their* mind, and they get to love with all of *their* strength.

Now through history, people’s view of ethics came from a kind of pecking order; a divine pecking order where God is on top, preachers are second...*(laughter)* Now is that a problem? I mean I’m very humble...I’m just telling you what God wants you to do! You see, when you make yourself God’s lieutenant, and God is an invisible person that you can’t show anybody, that makes you a General! But a lot of people didn’t catch that at first. So kings came in and took that place...it’s a long story. But that idea that there’s a pecking order, and certain people are supposed to be here, certain people are supposed to be there, gives us an ethics that means that you’re supposed to know your place and stay in your place. That’s very ancient.

The prophets came to create a crisis and establish that model. If God is like that, if God is a King, if Jesus is a Lord, then that pecking order is where ethics come from. But if that’s not who God is, then we need to organize ourselves differently. What would theology be like in a democracy? We think of ourselves as a democracy, but we don’t have a democratic view of God. We have a feudal view of God. God is a King, a Queen...the head of the castle, and we find our little place on the pecking order – the angels, and then it goes down from there. That is an anti-democratic understanding, which helps

us to understand why the church has never been a very good friend of democracy. It's a lot harder to do it than to say it.

So the prophets created a crisis in the way that Israel was structured for domination. Jesus comes and creates a crisis as well. Let me read again this passage, the second passage that we're looking at, because, you see, I went all the way through Seminary and didn't hear Jubilee behind these words. I wasn't taught to hear Jubilee behind these words. Jesus, in the story, is going to get up and say, "This is the beginning of my ministry; this is what I'm all about." Listen to these words.

The spirit of our God is upon me, because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor.

Did you ever notice those words before? I hadn't. See, Good News, the Gospel, I thought was just this sort of generic spiritual, apolitical calling just to like people. I didn't think I'd have to treat them differently! I don't like that religion!

I have come to preach good news to those who are poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held in captivity, recovery of sight for those who are blind, and release for those in prison... to proclaim that this is the year of God's favor.

Now we're going to look at each of those words in a bit. But what I want to say is that they're much more dangerous when we remember Jubilee. Jesus was coming to announce the year of Jubilee. He did not come as a king or a queen. He said, "I've come not to be served, but to serve." You can understand why people would choose the Jesus with a crown over this dangerous, anarchical being. He told *us* to take the lowest place. He even said one of my favorite lines that I didn't even understand in Seminary. "Why are you calling me Lord, if you're not doing anything I'm saying?" You know how that feeling is. (*laughter*)

What I realized, against my will, really, is that this calling, this Gospel, has implications about the world. Politics is how we treat each other. To have an apolitical Gospel means I can love you in the abstract and take advantage of you in practice. "Release for those in captivity" has implications about prisons. An economy that is thriving more and more on prisons, imprisonment, and sweatshops overseas is a problem for this calling.

When it talks about release for those who are in debt...when you look back at the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray...it's been translated as "trespasses" and "trespassers"...but the words in Greek are "debts" and "debtors." "Forgive those who owe you stuff...as you forgive us for what we owe you." It has the inner peace that we're seeking, but it's not an inner peace of detaching from the world. It's an inner peace that comes from being congruent with our highest values.

This thing about giving sight to those who can't see...it's really problematic to use the word "blindness" and to think about the healing stuff, because it's not talking about physical impairment at all. Lisa Larges is someone who has a sight impairment. She is just about the most visionary person I know. What it's talking about is a different kind of impairment. When I look at you in terms of myself, I'm not seeing what's there. That's having eyes and not seeing. So when we look at the Arab uprisings this Spring, for example, in Western terms, and they don't get to talk for themselves...our President speaks for them...there's something amiss.

So what [we're] being called to is something very radical and very revolutionary. And yes, it's loving, yes, there's peace inside. It's not less than the other views of Christianity, but it is certainly more. When I graduated from Seminary, I noticed none of this. But the words haunt me as I read them now. And I see this first sermon of Jesus as a call to a kind of spiritual revolution. It's got inner peace, it's got the hopes that go beyond this world. It doesn't reduce spirituality to politics, but it is a spirituality that includes politics.

[The book of] Jeremiah has jokes in it. We don't see that because we see [the book of] Jeremiah as this very dour kind of thing. He tells a story of Israel being surrounded by enemies, and the prophet calling people to observe a Jubilee. Release the slaves, forgive the debt...so they do that inside the walls, and suddenly the enemy disappears. Instantly they put the oppression back, and the prophet throws up his hands. It's like the CEO that was very frustrated driving through town, wanting a parking place. He prays, "God if you will give me a parking place, I'll give my workers a livable wage. Heck, I'll throw in Worker's Comp, I'll increase the safety of their working conditions, if you'll just give me a parking space." Suddenly the sky opens, angels come down, lights flash, and this SUV backs out right in front of the CEO. And the CEO says, "Never mind, God, I found one myself." (*laughter*)

Israel never observed Jubilee. The church has never really observed Jubilee. No nation has ever observed Jubilee, but what if we did? *What if we did?* This sermon of Jesus' is a call to Jubilee. Jesus was talking about not just individual understanding, but of a kingdom, of a fellowship, of a family of those who care about the whole world, and you are invited to that. Jubilee began with a trumpet blow. It wasn't a burden, it was a party. It was a new way of celebrating all of humankind. It isn't mixing church and politics, at all. The word "Gospel" was a political term [that] meant "the news that was going out – news of a victory that had taken place." Listen one more time to these words.

God has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive, recovery of sight to those who can't see, and release to those who are in prison; to proclaim that this is the year of God's favor.

Love that does justice is not mixing politics with the Gospel. It *is* the Gospel.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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