

YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

July 11, 2010

the Rev. Dr. James Gertmenian

Text: Deuteronomy 30:9–14; Luke 10:25–37

The best sermons are not speeches unto themselves, monologues delivered from pulpit to pew. The best sermons are those in which the preacher articulates a conversation that is going on in the congregation and gives voice to thoughts that are already in the hearts of those who are listening. Seen this way, the sermon begins long before the preacher opens his mouth and it ends long after he sits down. This part—the part that we’re doing right now—is like a clip from a longer movie, and it really doesn’t have much meaning apart from that larger context.

With that in mind, last week we instituted a summer Bible Study series that invites members of the congregation to become actively involved in the preparation of the sermon. So, last Sunday morning at 9 AM—on July 4, of all days!—about thirty-five of you gathered to discuss the texts that I am preaching on this morning. And today at 9, there was a discussion of the texts that Jeff is going to preach on next Sunday. I didn’t attend this morning, but last week’s discussion was rich and thoughtful and certainly helpful to me as I prepared for this sermon. For those of you who were there, I hope that you recognize your influence on what I am saying. At the same time, as is appropriate, I take full responsibility for my own ideas. Put it this way: if there is credit to the sermon, the credit is shared. If blame, the preacher bears it alone.

Let us pray:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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A word about the Book of Deuteronomy. After the Exodus from Egypt, and after years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel finally came to Mount Nebo, a high spot from which they could look over into Canaan, the Promised Land. For reasons that remain inscrutable to all but God, Moses, who had led the people for all of those years, was not allowed to cross over into that land of milk and honey. He was destined to die there on Nebo with the goal so near...and yet so far. This was the image that Martin Luther King recalled on the night before his own death, when in a prescient speech he said, “I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I’ve looked over into the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I know that as a people, we will get to the promised land.” Moses, too, before he died, is said to have given a speech—or several speeches—to the people on the plains of Moab below Mount Nebo, and these are what make up much of the Book of Deuteronomy. These

speeches lift up the covenant between God and the people, and they include a weighty collection of laws that the people are to follow if they keep the covenant. It's a bewildering array. There are dietary laws proscribing pork and shellfish, laws against wearing clothes made of wool and linen woven together, laws against plowing a field with a donkey and an ox yoked together. These and other relics like them are curiosities...interesting, quirky, sometimes disturbing, but hardly applicable to our lives. But along with them, the Book of Deuteronomy contains laws that are not relics at all but are timeless insights into the depths of the human soul. Laws for the protection of the widow and the orphan. Laws regarding the treatment of strangers and sojourners. Laws about avoiding various idolatries that distract or seduce one from the worship of the true God. So, the book is a mixed bag. And it makes no more sense to throw the whole lot out than it does to preserve every law regardless of its contemporary applicability. The fact is, all reading of scripture is selective; the question is, what filter, what lens do you use to decide which parts are timeless and which parts may be rightly put away as quaint reminders of an earlier time?

For most progressive Christians, it's not the *words* of the Bible that are holy to us, or any suggestion that they are inerrant or universally useful, but we revere, rather, the *Word* that is embodied in the text as a whole, the great conceptual grounding, the underlying flow, the overarching spiritual and ethical wisdom that we find there. To some, admittedly, this seems like a great liberal cop-out, the mushy thinking that progressives are often accused of, a form of interpretation that pretty much allows anything and everything. But the truth is that if you take the Bible seriously—rather than literally—then you have set for yourself a Herculean task of sifting from all of that material that which is truly timeless, and you take upon yourself the very real risk that you might be wrong. This, to me, is the more heroic faith, faith that relies not on certainty but accepts as part of life the “fear and trembling” of which Kierkegaard wrote...faith not as the blind following of a rule book or a list of instructions, but faith as a courageous journey into unknown territory where guidance comes in hints, and dreams, and whispers.

But in the face of that difficult journey, it is good, now and then, to receive some reassurance...and that's what we find in the latter part of this morning's text from Deuteronomy. The passage begins with what might be called the “Deuteronomic equation:” namely, that if you live according to God's law you will prosper. It's an audacious claim to make, particularly because common experience seems to fly in the face of it. We know people who are loving and kind and merciful but who do not prosper, at least as far as we can see. And we know people who are not loving or kind or merciful who do quite well for themselves. The claim of Job's friends—namely that his great suffering must be due to some terrible thing that he has done—is a weak, ultimately failing attempt to say that the world is just in some mechanical, legalistic way: do good and you get rewarded, do evil and you get punished. The same argument, from another perspective, would suggest that those who prosper must have done something wonderful to deserve such riches. But the opposite argument—that there is no justice, that all is randomness—is equally unsatisfying. Of course one can resolve the problem by saying that the appropriate rewards and punishments are meted out in some other life, but that idea, too, leaves the heart cold and the mind balking. The only solution I am aware of that comes even close is the claim that good works are their own reward...that there is a prosperity of the soul that accrues when one lives in accord with God's law, and a poverty of the soul that empties one out when one is living counter to that law. I believe that this is often true. But even here, one runs afoul of some actual experience. Mother Theresa, a paragon of good works, revealed in the end that she had a tortured soul through most of her life. And some of the most selfish people in

the world do seem to enjoy their prosperity with a minimum of worry and seemingly no soul-sickness. I wonder what you think. Can someone who flaunts God's basic commandments—for love, generosity, justice—be truly happy? Do you know of saints, on the other hand, for whom that same happiness is elusive? Call it a preacher's midsummer torpor, but I'm not going to fully tackle those questions...but will leave them to you for chewing over in the languid days of July and August.

It's the other half of the reading from Deuteronomy, though, that I want to leave you with. Listen again. God says:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Some translations of the last sentence read: "No the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it." In our study group last week, I think most of us had mixed feelings about these words. On the one hand, there is a profound comfort in them...in the promise that what God requires of us is within our grasp, both intellectually and ethically, both in terms of understanding and practice. There is, the passage says, nothing particularly esoteric or complex about being in tune with the divine will. It's not, as they say, rocket science. As if to prove the point, the lectionary today also gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke. The lead-in to the parable has a lawyer asking Jesus how he can achieve eternal life—which, by the way, is not necessarily life that extends beyond death but life that goes so deep that it touches eternity. Jesus' answer is to recall the Sh'ma (also from Deuteronomy)—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind"—and append to it the accompanying commandment: "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Just as the Bible has many words, but one Word flowing through it, so there are many laws, but really only one Law, and Jesus has recapitulated it. And then to prove his point, he tells a story. Now, one could talk forever on this parable. We could analyze the role of the priest who walked by on the other side when he saw the man beaten in the ditch. We could do the same for the Levite. We could explore, with profit, the surprise ending of the story—namely that it's a Samaritan—in other words, a despised one, rather than the religious ones—who does the right thing. There are dozens of details to be taken in and learned from. But for all practical purposes, it comes down to something quite simple: compassion. You don't need to make it complicated. You don't need volumes on Christian ethics. You need not ponder forever. The way of faith is embodied in this: love of God and compassion for neighbor.

This is not, by the way, to make light of ethical dilemmas, or to suggest that all of them are solved easily. We do need our ethicists and our philosophers and our thinkers to help us understand how compassion might best be lived out in a particular situation. Regarding abortion, for instance, what is the meaning of compassion, and how may it best be lived? Similarly in many end-of-life issues, it isn't always easy to determine what the compassionate course is. But neither is it impossible, and the promise in scripture is that if you are truly guided by love of God and compassion for neighbor, and if other considerations are put away, then the way forward will be made clear. In other words, in many more cases than we are ready to admit, we know what we are to do. The problem is

not one of understanding, but of will. Most of the time we know what we are to do. It brings to mind a sermon I heard from an African-American preacher to a chapel full of white seminarians at the height of the Civil Rights movement. “You know what to do,” was his refrain, raised with a compelling cadence. “You know what to do.” “You know what to do.” He was right. For all the complexity of the Civil Rights question, at the heart of things we knew what we had to do, where we were to stand, what we needed to proclaim. It wasn’t complicated.

But that brings us to a particularly plaintive lament that was raised at the end of last week’s discussion. One member of the group recounted a case where, yes, he knew what he was supposed to do, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. When he was young, there was another child in his school who had a badly deformed face. Our friend knew, with his mother’s help, that the thing to do was to befriend this child. But that meant risking disapproval or shunning from other children. He knew what to do, but he was not able to take that risk. He is not alone, of course. There isn’t a person in this room who cannot tell a similar story—many stories—about a time when the right way was clear but the will wasn’t there. Didn’t the Apostle Paul say, “I do not do the good that I want, but the evil that I don’t want, that is what I do”? We all know this experience.

But the promise of God is not that doing the right thing will be easy, only that it will be possible. And it is that possibility that keeps us growing, that keeps us alive. If God’s will for us were truly beyond our reach, what would be the point? But these challenges—the small, daily ones and the larger ones that come along at particular moments in our lives—these stretch us, challenge us, help us to grow. What’s more, the great gift of living in community is the possibility—if we will grasp it—of receiving the encouragement and strength we need from our brothers and sisters—encouragement and strength that can help us do the things we know we are meant to do. And there is the gift, too, of this assurance:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it.

This morning, I’m wondering what it is that is “in your heart and in your mouth” that you know that you are to do. May you be blessed as you seek to live into these challenges. Thanks be to God! Amen.