



14 PENTECOST (PROPER 18)

23 Ordinary

5 September 2004

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

I'm going to share a couple of letters with you this morning from my "To the Pastor" file.

This morning's first letter was sent to me shortly after I was installed as Pastor here at St. Paul Church. It was written in response to an article in one of the local papers that quoted me as saying that the people of St. Paul understand the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel. The writer begins, "Dear Pastor; What seminary did you go to? The Gospel is not about being inclusive as you and the people at St. Paul seem to believe. It is about conforming ourselves to what God demands of us. The Gospel tells us that sinners will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. *Blah, blah, blah*, Sincerely, *blah, blah, blah*."

The next letter is more recent and comes from *Anonymous*. If the postmark is any indication, Anonymous lives in a state east of the Mississippi and writes to me in my role as a member of the ELCA's Human Sexuality Studies Task Force. He or she skips the niceties of any sort of salutation and jumps right in: "It used to be that everyone knew exactly what God's will for our lives is. It is in the Bible. I don't know why the church is wasting its time and our money studying sex when everything is made perfectly clear in Scripture. The church must teach that if you obey all God's commandments, ordinances, and statutes, you will prosper and live. If you disobey any of God's commandments, ordinances, and statutes, evil will befall you and you will surely die. It's time we got back to obeying *all* of what the Bible says instead of picking and choosing. See Deuteronomy 30." It just so happens that I know Deuteronomy 30 quite well—I've received more than just a few letters telling me to see Deuteronomy 30—a part of which was our first reading this morning. In this chapter of Deuteronomy the author tells how Moses purportedly laid out for people the consequences of following or not following all of the commandments, ordinances, and statues written in the Torah. Indeed, Deuteronomy 30 seems to be an especially well-loved portion of scripture for those who wish to protect us all from eating shrimp, lobster, and ham or from wearing blended fabrics.

In all seriousness, both of the letter writers that have shared their thoughts with us seem to view the Bible to be a set of *do's* and *don'ts*, and they and others of their ilk want to make sure that we follow the rules, all the rules, and nothing but the rules . . . or else. The first letter writer focuses on what he thinks the rules are that he finds in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The second writer wants to make sure we follow the Ten Commandments and the other commandments, statutes, and ordinances that can be used as weapons in our present day culture wars—I don't need to tell you what those are—see Leviticus 18 and 20. At any rate, both letter writers are insistent that read the Bible, learn the rules, and follow them. Then all will be well, praise the Lord, Amen.

One of my favorite essays from Martin Luther's works is a short little piece he wrote in 1525 entitled "How Christians Should Regard Moses." So, how are we Christians supposed to regard Moses and all the commandments, statutes, and ordinances from God that Moses gave to the people? Luther is characteristically to-the-point: "Moses has nothing to do with us." But how can Luther say that Moses has nothing to do with us? What about the Ten Commandments? Don't we have to at least follow them—or

else? Listen to the good campus pastor of Wittenberg as he echoes St. Paul in Romans and Galatians: “If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in [a certain] way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.”

I love it. But, what about the Ten Commandments? Why are they in the catechism; why did we memorize them? The commandments, admits Luther, do have their use. First, they are a good, common sense model for civil, secular law, the law that governs all people so as to keep some sense of order and keep us from harming the neighbor. These are the laws common to all cultures: do not kill, do not steal, do not take your neighbor’s wife, don’t be greedy. However, other of the commandments, statutes and ordinances no longer make sense. Here Luther makes an especially important point with regard to all of Scripture: “One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God’s word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken and whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day.” Second, says Luther, a reading of Moses shows us that if any of the commandments applied to us in the spiritual realm, we would indeed be in a heap of trouble. But the promises of Christ have superceded Moses. The promises of Christ are what have been spoken to us; they alone fit us. How’s that for giving up some prizes suppositions, some prized possessions?

In all of Scripture—Older Testament or Newer Testament, says Luther, the only thing that pertains to us who are united with Christ in Baptism are God’s promises of life and salvation—and “upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock.” God does not tell those who are in Christ not to do this and not to do that. Rather, God says—Go and do to your neighbor as Christ has done to you. Christ has accepted the unclean and the sinful without any regard to merit. In Christ, God has pronounced unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness for you and for all people. And in the cross, Christ has spoken God’s final word: Forgiveness. God’s final word in Christ is that God would rather be put to a shameful death on the cross than to be known as the God of wrath and vengeance.

Back to the two letter writers and my reply to them. Yes, dear writers, the Gospel of the Cross is about God’s radical inclusiveness of us sinners who will never do anything quite right. And no, the commandments of Moses have absolutely nothing to do with us in our relationship to God.

And now dear sisters and brothers, hear this Word and treasure it your heart. Do not look backward to Moses and do not turn the promise of the Gospel into a law. Rather, pick up and lift high the promise of the cross, for there in Christ God has spoken God’s final word: All are forgiven by God, and all are beloved daughters and sons of God. Everybody gets into the banquet. Everybody. No exceptions. But be careful when you proclaim that Good News, that Gospel. People have been killed for saying things like that.