

Neglected Books in the Lectionary

Two prominent Old Testament books – Leviticus and Judges – receive almost no attention in the three-year Revised Common Lectionary, which we use for the selected Scripture readings for our worship. Each book has just one reading included. Leviticus is in the first year, either after Epiphany if Easter is late, or after Pentecost if Easter is early. Judges is in the first year, but long after Pentecost, so it is only heard if Easter is early.

Given the prominence of these books in the Biblical narrative their neglect is problematic. Leviticus is one of the five books of the Law attributed to Moses (also Genesis, Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Judges is the bridge between the death of Joshua in the promised land and the anointing of Israel's first king, covering a period of about 300 years.

The aversion to Leviticus is to be expected. Who wants to read so many laws about so many particular matters? Judges on the other hand has powerful stories of God raising up judges, underdogs of one sort or another, to deliver the Israelites from their enemies. The one story in the lectionary is a portion of the story of Deborah, the only female judge over Israel, and clearly one of the best judges.

What is missing from the lectionary by its neglect of these two books is the main point of what God has to say to us in each book. The main point of Judges could easily be included in the lectionary. It is the final verse, "In those days there was no king in Israel. **Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**" (Judges 21:25) That verse concludes the 300-year cycle of Israel repeatedly turning away from God, getting into deep trouble, crying out for help, and God raising up a judge to rescue his people. The last verse is a searing indictment of ancient Israel, and also most nations in the 21st Century, including our nation.

The single reading from Leviticus chapter 19 is included no doubt because of the phrase in verse 18: ". . . , but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: . . ." When a Pharisee questions Jesus about the great commandment, he responds:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22-37-40)

I am thankful the lectionary includes the second great commandment, but the specificity of what it means to love your neighbor is missing. Leviticus 19 and 20 have several laws about how to love, including caring for the poor and the sojourner (foreigner), not stealing from your neighbor or slandering him, not hating your neighbor or bearing a grudge, and respecting and honoring the elderly.

There are also several laws in these chapters about how not to treat your neighbor, such as not using your daughter for sex trafficking, not sacrificing your children to idols, not committing adultery and incest, and not consulting mediums and necromancers. Our nation needs to hear these laws.

We also need to hear the main point of this section of Leviticus, stated in the beginning and the ending:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “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.**” (Lev. 19:1-2)

“You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. **You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.**” (Lev. 20:22-26)

The beginning is in the lectionary, but not the ending. They frame these two chapters, emphasizing that God’s people shall be holy, because he is holy. God alone is holy since he alone is God. There is no compatibility between his holiness and the unholy. Therefore he detested the Canaanites’ inhumanity and idolatry (“the customs of the nations”). All the prohibitions in these chapters were against their daily behavior, behavior which tragically is much like the behavior of many in our culture.

In our baptisms, our Father separated us “from the peoples” of our culture. He set us apart, consecrated us, to be his children. We can only be his children if we too are holy. Therefore he put us to death with Jesus in our baptisms, thereby removing our unholiness. Then he raised us in our baptisms with Jesus, making us as holy as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As saints we no longer do what is right in our own eyes, but we do what is right in God’s eyes.