

Reflection

John Wilkinson, Third Presbyterian Church

At Temple B'rith Kodesh annual exchange

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I am honored to be here, as always, and very grateful. This relationship continues to be a gift to me personally, and to the Third Church community. It is also, I believe, a witness – if I may use that word – to a broader culture where coming together and finding commonality seems painfully elusive and extraordinarily needed. We do not agree on everything – religiously, to be sure, and perhaps on other things. But we agree on an awful lot, even to the point where we affirm that the things we do not hold in common will not serve to blot out those that we do.

We share so much. Common values and commitments. Common relationships, in the schools our children attend and the offices where we work. In fact, I see almost as many of you in Wegman's as I do Third Church members, which is saying something, though I don't know what.

The values we share, many flowing from shared faith commitments, are needed now as much as they ever have been – in our world and in our culture. It is so easy to pick on the tone of this presidential election, and I am not smart enough to know whether the campaign is the symptom or the cause. But I do know we are living in a moment defined by aggressive divisiveness, extremism, greed, self-protection. Our traditions are so committed to the transformation of those trends – call it justice, peace, shalom, hope, reconciliation, love. We have what the world needs.

We already share it from our respective locations, and Rabbi Stein and I are searching for new ways, deeper ways, that together we might make a difference in our community and address our particular challenges, especially when those who are so clearly God's children are not afforded the opportunities that God so clearly desires.

We are doing something a bit different this time around. We are looking at each other's sacred texts. It's not preaching, exactly, because that presumes a liturgical foundation. But it's something like teaching with a value perspective, which is what we Presbyterians are most committed to anyway. Our founding theologian, John Calvin, fancied himself not a theologian

but a Bible teacher, and worship can look like a lot of things but for it to be true Presbyterian worship it really needs to have a reflection on a biblical text.

So we will try this. I get to go first, and if it goes horribly, Rabbi Stein has 24 hours to come up with a new plan! So come tomorrow and see what happens!

Your Torah portion for the day comes from the book of Leviticus, chapters 9-11. For us, Leviticus comes up once every three years in our lectionary cycle, from chapter 19, the death of Moses. Therefore, Leviticus can be a bit of a puzzlement. Most recently, the only times we've paid much attention to it is in debates about human sexuality, where various positions along the spectrum have either embraced certain verses or rejected them.

This morning's portion seems to include two different movements – one about Aaron's priestly leadership and one about food. I may be on interpretive thin ice, but a connecting point between those movements seems to be community and community life – how will we live together as a community, both our worship of the divine and our patterns of living, and what do we need?

We need leaders, first of all, in this case priestly leaders. This feels like an intricate ritual, and what strikes me is the continual interplay between the leader and the people. This is no private matter, but an act coming from the people and for their well-being. When the people are blessed by Moses and Aaron, the Lord's glory appears. Holiness precedes worship and proceeds from it.

Then two of Aaron's sons die, apparently for disobedience to God. It is a sobering moment and a cause for mourning and grief.

Aaron is then charged as a leader, with clearly defined responsibilities and what seem to be clearly defined behavioral parameters. This is serious business, leading the congregation on the Lord's behalf.

Then a transition, as Moses instructs Aaron to instruct the people about food that is clean and food that is unclean. These are verses that the Christian community over time has been aware of, but has not treated in the same way that the Jewish community has. So I have many more questions than I do insights at this point.

And then the conclusion: the people are to do the things they are commanded to do as Aaron the priest becomes the conduit for the Lord – a kind of transitive movement...you, people,

become holy because I, the Lord, am holy. That rhythm is repeated throughout Leviticus; indeed it is a biblical rhythm – God’s holiness leading to the community’s holiness.

That is a very quick and I hope very appropriate rehearsal. Two movements – acknowledgement of a priestly leader and the identification of dietary norms with a sobering loss tying the two together.

Walter Brueggemann, the well-known biblical scholar from my tradition, writes that the context of all of this is rehearsing the covenantal commandments, what the people must do in order to maintain a covenantal relationship with God.

Covenant is an important concept in your tradition; it is as well in ours. I remember spending significant time in Sunday school as a child differentiating between “contract” and “covenant.” This is all about the relationship, holy relationship, first to God and then with one another.

Brueggemann also helps me, at least, think about that term, “holy,” and its nuances even in Leviticus. Both for the divine and for the people, it connotes separateness, but it also connotes righteousness and justice – qualities of God and aspirations of those who are connected covenantally to God.

I don’t know about rabbinical school, but my seminary experience included major efforts to create vocabularies that were dense and specialized. That is probably true for every vocation. In my Bible classes, words like “hermeneutics” and “exegesis” hovered in the air like UFO’s. “Hermeneutics” simply means “interpretation.” “Exegesis” is a bit more nuanced, meaning something like “reading out of.” We were taught to read *out of* the biblical text, and not read into from our own perspective. Of course it is impossible to separate your own bias and values and life experiences when reading the text, but you get the point.

So that when I look at these chapters from Leviticus, mysterious to me and our tradition on so many levels, I can yet detect themes that speak to us. Covenant. Community. Leadership.

Robert Boling was one of my beloved Hebrew Bible teachers in seminary. In fact, he quipped that the New Testament was the pamphlet at the back of the Bible! Boling one time identified the Ten Commandments in a way I will not forget. He likened them to the kinds of lists families put on their refrigerator doors at home. Family values. Embraced norms. Not a list of rules so much but a set of behaviors and practices that allow the covenantal community to live together peaceably and harmoniously, with God and with one another. Of course we will not take from one another. Of course we will respect each other. Of course we will rest from time to time. Of course!

It feels as if – in another way – that is what is happening this morning. The establishment of communal norms in terms of worship and diet, so that the order of a community's life may be maintained.

I may be reading into this. But it seems as if each of our traditions shares common themes and common hopes about communal formation and communal norms that allow people to live together and that make provision for those on the fringes.

Communities gathered around worshipping the divine need norms. And they need leaders. These are the things we've always thought about in my tradition – the nature of our covenanted communities – congregations – and the leaders needed to guide and nurture.

The focus this morning is on priestly leadership, and we are spending time thinking about that as well. You no doubt read about the decline of mainline Protestantism. It is more nuanced than that, of course, but what is true is that many of our congregations are declining numerically, if not spiritually, which means that sustaining full-time pastoral positions is increasingly difficult. I don't know how it is for the Jewish community, but for us, seminary enrollment is down. Part-time positions are on the rise. We are needing to be creative and flexible, which is good to the point where it does not create anxiety.

But the prior issue, of course, is the nature and profile of the communities being led, and how rapidly things are evolving. We read about the millennials and the "nones," that's "n-o-n-e," those who mark no religious affiliation on any survey. They also identify as spiritual but not religious. That impacts all of this, of course, and perpetuating the church for the church's sake should never be our primary objective.

What I think is often missing in our current conversation is the heart of this morning's message – the need for community, the deep human need for relationship, with God, and with others. We hunger for it, even as we hunger for God.

So our task is not propping up old models. Our shared opportunity, I believe, is finding new ways of creating community and identifying leadership models that work in the 21st, soon to be 22nd, century.

And one thing more. For each of our congregations, community does not stop at our walls. It spills over into the world. We are to be a blessing to the nations. That's why we care for our neighbors, for the sojourner. That's why we care for those without food or clothing or shelter. That's why we care about public education. That's why we care about iniquities and injustices of all kinds, affecting those within our communities and those beyond them.

That may be a leap from a relatively prescribed ritual of leadership identification and dietary codes, but it may not be. We engage the texts to see what God us up to, and what God continues to say to us. Here is one moment in our history, one moment of many, when God is about the project of bringing people together and lifting up leaders. That process did not stop generations ago. It continues today, in new ways that echo the old ones, for the sake of the covenant, and for the sake of all those about whom God cares, people known to us, and people known to God.

I am hopeful to see how our two congregations can continue to build community, for our own sake, for each other's sake, and for the sake of those who live on our city's streets and neighborhoods. May it be so, and may we be blessed by God and be a blessing to one another and to God's beloved world.