

Saturday, February 11, 2017 - Day 41 – Leviticus 13-15, Psalm 35, Mark 8

I felt it was a great honor to be asked to write some of these meditations. Then I read the lessons I had been assigned and my jaw fell ever more slowly open: rules governing people with leprosy, how to decide if bald people are unclean or not (!), what to do about a wet dream, and the protocol for menstruation (no doubt, as written by a man). I mean really, what person would not jump at the chance to meditate on this selection? But as I read Psalm 35 and then Mark 8, I began to see the hint of a thread on which we might hang these three lessons: community.

It is true that this section of Leviticus (notably the book of the Bible where Bible Reading Plans go to die) deals with uncleanness and the treatments thereof. It is equally true that it usually makes for less than inspiring reading. However, it is helpful to remember what God was doing with the Hebrew people: calling them out from the nations, setting them apart, making them holy, which is to say, different. Like other books, the Hebrew name for this book of the Bible is taken from its first word: *Wayyiqra*, meaning, “He [God] called.” God was calling this people to be different than all the other peoples around them. And why? Remember what Moses said right before the people crossed into the Holy Land? He wanted to go over the law again, “so that it might go well for them and their children forever.” God wants it to go well for you. Being a people set apart, a community called together, is how that begins to happen.

When you get right down to it, a lot of these rules make a certain amount of sense on how it can go well for you, especially from a public health perspective. If someone has a contagious disease, don't be around them until they get better. Wash your hands if you touch something dirty. It's probably better not to live in a moldy house. Use a ritual to celebrate when someone gets healthy. Care for your community, and that includes their physical health. We're in this together.

Caring for community requires an understanding that we are a community. The psalmist begs God to fight on their side when enemies rise up against them. There's a lot of anger there and a lot of angst, but towards the middle of the psalm there is this tender moment around verse 13. The psalmist writes that even when his enemies were sick he prayed for them and felt badly for them. Right there is a recognition that we are in community, even with our enemies. We're in this together.

In Mark 8, Jesus is feeding the four thousand, caring for the immediate community that surrounded him by meeting their very basic need of hunger. When they then asked for a sign you can hear Jesus' frustration. He said no sign would be given. I wonder why? Was this just because he was frustrated? Or was it because the people themselves were supposed to be the sign? The community together was the sign that pointed to God's goodness every time they told the story of how they were fed, of how they were healed, of how they were reconstituted. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah at the end of this chapter, Mark is showing us that whatever we imagined our community to be, it's bigger than that. Jesus moves on from that point to foretell his death and resurrection, so as to say that his community includes the whole world, those

who were once, those who are now, and those who are yet to be. We are in this together and we should not be ashamed of that.

At the end of the day, I think God knows people are people. We are fallible; we are subject to the whims and processes of our gloriously created bodies; we get frustrated by our enemies but we are called to pray for them all the same; when we tell of God's action in our lives, we serve as signposts pointing beyond ourselves to God. We'll get it right and we'll get it wrong. We can even set it as a goal for ourselves to get it right more than we get it wrong. We can follow the rules so that it will go well for us, but when we fail, we also know we have a way back: the cross. We are the people, the community, of God and we are in this together, as God intended.

By The Very Rev. Ryan Whitley