

## Wednesday, February 8, 2017 – Day 38 – Leviticus 4-6, Psalm 32, Mark 5

Leviticus is one of those books that we tend to skip over and for much of today's passage it is easy to see why. At first glance it seems little more than paragraph after paragraph of laws that cover every circumstance and then the bloody ways in which they must be atoned. At a certain point all those kidneys and burning fat from slaughtered animals loses its appeal. The whole thing reads as if the author was a butcher who later went to law school. And yet as I made myself slow down and really engage this text, I was surprised by its theological and spiritual depth.

The first thing that struck me was just how much responsibility the priests bore. Starting at 4:3, we learn that if the priest sins it brings guilt, not only on himself, but on all the people. A bull must be sacrificed which is the same sacrifice that must be offered if the whole people sin (4:13). On the other hand, if a ruler sins (4:22) it does not bring guilt on the people at all. It is his sin and his sin alone and he can make up for it with a mere goat.

At first glance, it all seems a bit hyperbolic. I mean, I get that priests are to be holier than the average bear, but to put their sin on par with the sin of the whole community, well that might be carrying it a bit too far.

Or is it?

How many times have those who supposedly speak for God lead their community astray, often with disastrous results? From Jonestown and the Branch Davidians to the clergy sex abuse scandals of recent decades, there can be no doubt that when clergy sin, that sin can contaminate the whole community and has the power to destroy lives.

If we manage to move past all the blood and guts, that lesson is still very relevant for us today. Because of our power to influence hearts and minds, clergy have real power. I am blessed to have had people tell me that in the exercise of my ministry I changed or even saved their lives. Unfortunately, our power to harm often comes to bear much more quickly and often with more severe results. The slightest mistake is sometimes enough to drive someone away. We all know someone who left a congregation because the priest didn't remember their name or because they didn't like a sermon. Yet such petty grievances are nothing compared to the damage done when people are made to feel unworthy, when they are sunned and ignored or when they are told that they are going to hell because of who they love. How many people have not only left a church but even turned away from God altogether because their clergy failed in their responsibility or chose to abuse their power?

Clergy would do well not to overlook the passage. Yet there are implications in it for the rest of us because as Christians we are all called to be priests. Therefore, we must all be aware that when we act in the name of our faith (or even if we are only perceived as doing so) in that moment and by those actions, we wield enormous power.

As we live into this role, may God make us ever mindful of the divine power that we have been granted. For just as by grace we have the power to bless and to heal, we must never forget that as priests, my sin has the terrible capacity to bring disaster on others. And no amount of bulls and goats can ever wash that damage away.

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