Worship Resources for February 19th—Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Narrative Lectionary: Forgiven at Jesus’ Feet, Luke 7:36-50 (Psalm 130:3-6)

A timely passage in the Levitical code, 19:1-2, 9-18 speaks about how God expected the people to treat the foreigners, the poor, and all of their neighbors. God expected the people to be fair and just, to not spread rumors or slander those around them, but also to be careful not to hate anyone or seek revenge. As we become a more global society, as in the United States the population dramatically changes, and our neighbors are of other religions and cultures, we must heed the wisdom handed to our ancestors and learn to live and love together.

In this section of Psalm 119:33-40, the psalmist seeks God’s instruction, to be taught God’s way, not only in statutes and decrees, but also to create a way of life. The psalmist understands that the ordinances and statutes are there to help, but what God desires is a way of life that is cultivated, to where the law is not thought of as law but is woven into the fabric of one’s life.

Paul continues his argument to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23. Paul is concerned that the people do not understand that they belong to God, not to a human teacher, the way the Greeks belonged to different philosopher’s schools of thought. Paul also remind them that they are a temple for God’s spirit—which will also come up when Paul speaks of some of the sexual discretions of certain members—but in this case, it is to remind them that God’s spirit lives in them, so therefore they belong to God and to no other.

We conclude the reading from Matthew 5, this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, with verses 38-48. Jesus continues his discourse with, “You have heard that it was said… but I say to you…” statements. Jesus gets into the crux of chapter 5, which is that if we live into God’s ways of loving our neighbor, we really can transform the world. Jesus teaches about nonviolent resistance (see Walter Wink for great explanations and understandings of this passage). The last line about perfection really is about consistency—to be consistent as God is consistent. God loves everyone. Just like a good parent, God loves us always but doesn’t always like us. However, God is fair and just, and so we ought to be. We don’t have to like everyone, but we have to love them, and we need to be consistent in how we offer grace, how we resist evil, how we live into God’s ways of justice.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the passage of the woman who anoints Jesus as told in Luke’s account. In Matthew, Mark, and John (in John, the woman is Mary, Martha and Lazarus’ sister), this happens right before the last supper, right before Jesus’ betrayal. In Luke, this is much earlier, and the woman is called sinful. Jesus had accepted an invitation to eat supper at the home of Simon the Pharisee, but Simon is appalled, along with others, that Jesus has allowed this woman to touch him (I’ve always been curious how this woman came into the house, if she was a sinner—either Simon left the front door open, or this woman was already present in this house…) Jesus argues that this woman has served him and welcomed him when Simon has not, and that because she recognizes her sin and he doesn’t, and that she has shown great love, her sins are forgiven. Jesus concludes by speaking directly to the woman: “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”

Psalm 130:3-6 is the middle portion of this short psalm, seeking God and imploring God to listen. The psalmist declares that if God did not offer forgiveness, no one could stand before God, but God is merciful and just, and forgiveness abounds. We are made with souls that thirst for God alone, and in turning to God, receiving forgiveness, we satisfy that longing.

Our world is in great turmoil now. Perhaps this is a little misleading: the United States is in great turmoil, and some of the world is affected by that (not all readers of this blog are in the United States). It seems like everything is falling apart. But Christ has taught us how to live, how to love one another. The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story, from Genesis 12 on, of a people who were strangers in a strange land. They were a people who wrestled with government and control and power—but God kept trying to get their heads out of the sand and to see that following God’s ways was more important, and that those things would fall into place if they followed God’s ways. In the New Testament, the people were under the control of an empire, and Christ, and later Paul, taught them how to live under empire—which is still to follow God’s ways, to speak out against injustice, and to model our lives after God’s ways—which was not to seek vengeance or to hate one’s enemies, but to continue to see them as children of God.

In some ways, some of the current political discourse that has infiltrated the church is the same conversation we have had for thousands of years: how do we live with others who are different from us? How can we live into God’s ways when we can’t live with each other? What is the role of human government in enforcing God’s ways? For some, freedom is found by making God’s laws and ordinances into human laws and ordinances. For others, freedom is found by being able to choose to follow God without the encroachment of government. We can’t answer these questions easily. But we can look to the scriptures, look to our greater human experience, and know that each of us has to do our part to faithfully live into God’s ways and respond to the injustice around us.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 119:33-36, 40)

Teach us, O God, Your ways,

 **And we will follow Your ways until the end.**

Grant us understanding, O God,

 **So that we may follow You with our whole heart.**

Turn our hearts to You,

 **And turn us away from selfish gain.**

We long for Your ways, O God,

 **In this time of worship, lead us into righteousness and New Life. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that we are fatigued, tired, distressed, at all that is going on in the world. We are worn out and weary from all of the struggle. Grant us in this space rest for the journey that is ahead of us. Grant us in this space wisdom to choose how we engage and bring change to the world. Grant us in this space Your comfort and clarity, knowing that You are still the Lord of Life in the midst of the hardship and despair many of us face. Renew us, give us strength, and guide us to live into Your ways of love, mercy, justice, and hope. In the name of Christ, who takes our burden upon Himself, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Lamentations 3:22-23)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God’s mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is God’s faithfulness. Go forth and love one another, knowing that the God of love and peace and justice is with you, renewing you, restoring you, and giving you strength for the journey ahead. Amen.

Prayer

Great Invitation to Hope, we come before You accepting what You have offered us. You have not promised us that the way will be easy, only that it will be worth it. You have not promised us comfort and satisfaction in this life, only that we will be comforted, and in You find healing and hope. You have not promised us that we will not see hardship, suffering, and despair; You have promised us that we will not be alone. Guide us to become living hope for one another, to bring healing to one another, and to remind us to reach out to one another, for it is only together that we can find salvation, only together that we can share the love of Christ, only together that we will know the fullness of Your mercy, love and forgiveness. Amen.