Worship Resources for February 23, 2014—Seventh Sunday after 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

Leviticus contains all sorts of strange laws and ordinances for the people of Israel as they entered freedom from Egypt. Much of it we skip over now, but for a new people, coming out of slavery, having never governed themselves, they needed both guidelines for how to live as a community and a way of not forgetting which God had led them into freedom. This was important for Moses and for the leaders, that they not forget the God who had delivered them and start worshipping other gods. The way they remembered the poor, how they treated their neighbors, how they loved their family—these were all reflections on how they remembered and loved God. If they strayed from God, they strayed from their neighbor. If they strayed from their neighbor, they had also strayed from God.

This part of Psalm 119 reminds the reader/listener of the desire to follow God’s ways, to live out the commandments and ordinances, and to seek God’s help to stay true to God’s path. The psalmist seeks understanding from God so that they may not stray from God’s ways and asks God for confirmation of the covenantal promises, that God would never leave them or abandon the ones who stay true.

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 comes back to the image of the people as the body of Christ, now the temple of God. Paul uses this image of the temple or the body to remind the people they are united in Christ, not divided over earthly leaders. The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God—no matter how wise or charismatic your earthly leader is, it is God who leads us, Christ whom we follow. Christ is the one who has laid our foundation, no other.

Matthew 5:38-48 completes this month-long reading of chapter 5. We complete chapter 5 by completing Jesus’ discourse on the law. Jesus has come not to abolish, but to fulfill, and has brought a new view of the law not as rules but as a way of life. This way of life calls us to live with others as God lives with us—to love our enemies as well as our friends, which perhaps is the most difficult teaching of Christ. Jesus reminds us that God rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. We are called to be perfect as God is perfect—but a better interpretation might be to be consistent as God is consistent, as a parent is consistent in their love for their child, whether they are behaving or not. This passage wraps up the important part of Jesus’ teaching—this is a way of life, not a set of rules that you check off. You must make your life consistent with the law, not against it—but if your life is consistent with the law, you will go to the extreme of loving your enemy as well as your neighbor. This is, contrary to what many Christians believe or have been told, very consistent with Jewish teaching. Many Jews go to extremes on the Sabbath such as not turning on light switches or driving cars so that they are consistent in their observance of the commandment to rest. You probably can rest even by turning lights on and off, but if you don’t, you’re more aware of the need to rest and to observe more fully in your day the Sabbath. Jesus’ teaching is actually very much in line with many of the rabbis of his day, but we have forgotten this in our own Christian life.

The law was given so that we might remember it is God who leads us, God who guides us, and God who gives us life. When we stray from the commandments we are straying from the fullness of life God desires for us. It’s not about rules, but about living with God, and living with God requires us to live with others. Following Jesus requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves in order to love God (1 John 4:21).

Call to Worship (from Psalm 119:33-37)

Teach us, O Lord, all of your ways,

**And we will follow You until the end.**

Give me understanding, that we may keep your covenant,

**And trust it with our whole heart.**

Lead us in the path of your commandments,

**For we find joy in following You.**

Turn our hearts to your decrees,

**And away from selfish gain.**

In this time of worship, lead us to draw closer to You.

**May we love You and love our neighbors as ourselves.**

**Open our hearts and minds to You in this time of worship.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy God, we confess that we do not always love our neighbor. We confess that we have despised others, even to the point of hatred. We confess that we have been hurt by others. We confess that forgiveness and reconciliation at times are just impossible for us. We know that nothing is impossible in You. We come to You, seeking healing and wholeness for us. Help us, whenever possible, to live in peace with others, to seek reconciliation and healing and forgiveness. For Your Son came and lived among us, was betrayed and denied, abused and put to death. He rose again, and came with the message of peace to those who had denied him and abandoned him. May we walk in his ways. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

For nothing is impossible with God. There is no place you can go, no end of the earth you can run, where God cannot find you. There is nothing on earth or beyond death that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are reconciled to God. Go and live with the love of God. Amen.

Prayer

Loving Savior, lead us into the way of life. Help us to love our enemies, to resist evil whenever we can, to live in your ways of peace and justice. Remind us to seek Your wisdom and guidance and not the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world leads us to seek fame, wealth, and our own success. Your wisdom calls us away from the path of the world and into the path of righteousness, where we seek the well-being of others, remembering to love our neighbor as You have first loved us. Guide us, and keep us close, and help us to seek the strength and love of others on the journey. In Your name we pray. Amen.