

Sermon: A Lawyer Asked Him a Question

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 1; Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46**

After this episode with the Pharisees, things begin to turn bad for Jesus, but today we'll focus on the answer he gave to the lawyer, a person learned in the Torah law as given to Moses. Why this particular lawyer would want to test Jesus about the law in the first place escapes us, because we suspect he already knew the answer, or should have.

We'll also reflect a little on what it might mean to be holy as God is holy.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus quotes Moses who quotes God who said, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' And we're conditioned then to say, 'And who is my neighbor?'

One could argue that the main point of the Ten Commandments is God's concern for the neighbor. Working our way backward, we can get a good sense of this concern:

You shall not covet *your neighbor's* house...You shall not covet *your neighbor's* spouse, nor anything that belongs to *your neighbor*...You shall not bear false witness against *your neighbor*...You shall not steal, commit adultery, or murder.

And so on.

Each of these commandments and all the others has something to do with how we behave with the people around us. They're meant to teach us how to live in community. In Leviticus, God talks about how we should relate to the poor, the great, 'your people,' meaning your tribe, 'your kin,' meaning your immediate family, and 'your neighbor,' meaning everyone else. The challenge is in loving these people 'as yourself.' Failing to do so, according to the prophet Jeremiah, shows that we 'do not know the way of the LORD, the law of [our] God' (Jeremiah 5:4). Too often, we treat God's ways as some unknowable mystery.

Search the internet for 'slavery in Massachusetts,' and all kinds of interesting facts pop up. Here are a few:

According to the book *Bound for America: The Forced Migration of Africans to the New World*, the first slaves imported directly from Africa to Massachusetts arrived in 1634. In December 1638, a slave ship named *Desire* brought Boston's first shipment of slaves from Barbados in exchange for enslaved Pequot Indians from New England.

Governor John Winthrop, a slave owner, helped write the first law legalizing slavery in North America, which the General Court passed on December 10, 1641, making the Massachusetts Bay Colony the first slave-holding colony in New England. The law applied to Plymouth Colony when the two merged in 1691.

It was a profitable but uncomfortable arrangement and over time, people began speaking out against slavery. In 1764, James Otis published a pamphlet which stated, 'The colonists are by the law of nature freeborn, as indeed all men are, white or black.'

Slavery continued in Massachusetts until the ratification of the Massachusetts Constitution in 1780, which included the following article:

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.¹

With that, slavery ended in Massachusetts but not by an act of law. Segregation was still enforced in many public places in the 1800s, including at New North Church, which includes two galleries for blacks way up in the back – one for men and one for women, even though slavery as an institution had all but ended.

A woman named Lucretia Leonard was often the only black woman in the galleries. Lucretia grew up in North Carolina, the daughter of a slave, and in Hingham, she worked as a servant for three sisters: Eliza, Katy and Anna Thaxter.

When the Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society voted against church segregation in 1841 – two hundred years after John Winthrop and his new law – the Thaxter sisters invited Lucretia to join them in their pew, with the support of the church's new pastor, the Rev. Oliver Stearns.

Some parishioners threatened to leave, but the sisters said they would worship from the church steps if Leonard couldn't sit with them. She did and eventually outlived them all. Lucretia died in 1904, and was mourned as a town icon.

Hingham became a hotbed for abolition, and Gov. John Andrew, a New North member who owned pew 16, created the 54th Massachusetts, the first regiment of free black soldiers in the Civil War.

We bring all of this up because it is our heritage. And one of the many things that makes this church special is our willingness to hear Scripture and then apply it to our lives. Psalm 1, verse 1, tells us that ‘Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread.’ Eliza, Katy and Anna Thaxter must have heard that verse, looked up at Lucretia in the gallery, and thought, ‘This has to change.’ In Leviticus, the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Our church ancestors heard these words, looked at the world around them, and decided they could change, and for the good.

As we go through life, we begin to know how we ought to live that life. When we match our learned experience with the received wisdom of our neighbors with what we see revealed in the Bible, we begin to see that a ‘way of life for one includes a way of life for all.’² Jesus sums it up for us with two commandments on which hangs everything.

We gathered here today to celebrate our church heritage, both old and new. It’s a continuum that stretches from when God began to create the heavens and the earth to right now. It will continue on until who knows when, and to paraphrase the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it will bend toward justice.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that, ‘Wherever sinfulness comes from and whatever drives it, it is less fundamental to human nature than holiness.’ People can be holy because we’re made in the image of God, who is holy. We can be sinful too, but that doesn’t come from God. Those with ears to hear the Word of God can do what is right. Our church ancestors proved that right here in this sanctuary, and we can emulate them every day.

Jesus said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ – that’s Sunday worship; what we’re doing now. He also said, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ – that’s service. To put a church word on it, that’s outreach, it’s ministry; it’s what we are called to do. It’s part of the

heritage we'll pass along to our children and to our children's children. We're here to help somebody.

When we leave today, let's carry with us the resolve of our church founders. Let us be mindful of the example of the Thaxter sisters, and of the faith of Lucretia Leonard. And let us continue to serve the community as have so many who have come before us, and to live the Gospel knowing that God is active in us, through us, and for us.

Amen.

¹ Rebecca Beatrice Brooks, 'Slavery in Massachusetts,' December 20, 2012.

<http://historyofmassachusetts.org/slavery-in-massachusetts/>

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 199.