

Mystic Truck Drivers in the Promised Land

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, October 26, 2008.

After forty years of leading the Israelites from Egypt through the wilderness, Moses is taken to the very threshold of the new land which they will settle, and there he dies. With his death, the Israelites mourn for a month, then begin their work of transforming from a refugee people to a nation called Israel, a people with a covenantal relationship with God.

They have come to this place with the help of Moses as intermediary between them and God. Moses guided them out of Egypt, led them to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, pleaded with God to spare their lives when they sinned and grumbled, and always, always reminded them that they have become a people chosen by God to be God's people. They have grown from a ragged group of former slaves to a formidable power about to conquer whole cities and to claim a territory which they call the Promised Land. With Moses's love for God and his love for his people as their pillar of fire, the people of Israel forged their identity as a people intimately connected to God. Later, their covenant with God is cemented in the writings of the Torah and the laws contained in them. These laws, along with prophets like Micah and Amos, were constant reminders to the people that their identity is tied up with their covenant and their relationship with God. In order to be true to that relationship, they must be true to the laws that God gave to them through Moses. These are the laws that gave them life and gave them the Promised Land.

By Jesus's time, the Promised Land has been conquered then lost, regained and lost again in the eternal battleground of Palestine. Now, the Jews are once again under foreign domination, and the Pharisees emerge as a group that looks at what this means for them as Jews in an environment that wants to obliterate them. Their question, as they see it, is this: How can we be faithful to God in all of life when we live in such a hostile environment? How can we as faithful people avoid capitulating to the values of the dominant culture? Their answer: that if they are to be faithful to who they are as Jews, they need to practice obedience to the law in all of their daily life, because the law is embodiment of their identity and faith.

We should not be too quick to condemn the Pharisees as we so often do. In many ways, we share their dilemma, and we often copy their solutions. Like the Pharisees, we understand how important it is to have shared values and practices that affirm our identity as Christians in an increasingly secularized and pluralistic society. I would not be here, and Christian Formation would not exist, if we did not believe that we need to pass on our Christian beliefs and values. Again like the Pharisees, we do not believe that we need to withdraw from ordinary society in order to stay faithful to God. Instead of opting out of the political sphere or blindly accepting the status quo, we have worked to influence the political process by advocating for payday lending reform, health care reform, and other political and social changes that would move this society ever closer to one which reflects the will of God.

But defining ourselves as a community of faith can be a tricky thing. Shared beliefs make natural boundaries between groups, and boundaries can turn into fortified walls that exclude rightful inhabitants of that community. Who's in, and who's out? The Pharisees tried to preserve and defend Israel's status as the people of the covenant by making religious law an everyday requirement. But the trouble was, when they expanded those strict social and purity laws to daily life, those laws tended to leave too many people out of that Promised Land. They left too many people out of that covenantal relationship with God that gave birth to the rules in the first place. In their need for integrity, they forgot about their community. They forgot who belongs in the Promised Land.

We too make assumptions about ourselves and our faith when we try to define who we are and who belongs in our spiritual world and in our church. Do these assumptions exclude or welcome people into that world? For example, does the idea of a three-pack-a-day cowboy having a mystical experience seem impossible? Is a mystic truck driver an oxymoron to you? Is not our image of a typical mystic a more orthodoxly religious person? Are we open to the possibility that the hard-drinking waitress at the loud and rowdy Big Mama's Diner may have a glorious vision of Almighty God tonight that does not fit our version of the Almighty God?

When one of the Pharisees asks Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus' answer challenges all of these divisions of identity. Of all the 600 or 700 laws and commandments that God gave to them, Jesus names two, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus. We often say that these two commandments encapsulate the whole of the law, and indeed Jesus says that "on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." But look at what they leave out that was always critical to maintaining a distinctive identity. They leave out *boundaries*. Jesus moves us out of that comfort zone that has built up fortified walls, and calls us to pay attention to the one thing that kept Moses going: love of God and love of others. We divide over taxes, health care, Wall Street and Main Street, evolution and a million other small and big disagreements. But in the end, Jesus says, put aside these boundaries and divisions and see what the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, really is about.

Moses never did set foot on the Promised Land. Some petty argument he had with God years and years ago cost him that experience. But he made the journey, in love and utter devotion to God and to his people. So perhaps the goal is not the Promised Land after all. And for sure, the goal is not the integrity of our own self-defined group to the exclusion of others in that Promised Land. Perhaps, as with Moses, the whole point is the journey, and the Promised Land is the journey, if you do it with love. If you know that, there is room in that Promised Land for that mystic truck driver after all.