

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

The Bible begins with five books, collectively called the Pentateuch. The Book of Leviticus is in right in the middle of the Pentateuch. Penta means "five" and "teuch" means books or scrolls, so Pentateuch means five books or five scrolls. Another word used to describe these first five books of the Bible is the Torah. You may have heard the word Torah being described as the Law, but a better translation is 'the instruction of God by revelation through Moses'. But even better than that, is to understand that "torah" comes from a root word in Hebrew, "yarah", which is associated with archery.

Archery? What does that have to do with the Bible? An archer shoots an arrow in order to hit a target. In this case, the target is the truth about God – the target is not God, the target is the truth about God and how one relates to God. The illustration on the screen conveys that. You see the archer, the arrow, the target, and behind the target, God.



What is the arrow in this metaphor? The arrow is the history, teaching and instruction to be found in the Pentateuch. The archer is the reader of the Pentateuch or the one who teaches about these scriptures. We can extend this metaphor beyond the Pentateuch to not only the other parts of the Hebrew scriptures, which are the historical books, poetical and wisdom books and prophetic books. We can extend this metaphor to the New Testament as well.

You and I, as students of the Bible, are the archers. The fact that our arms may tremble when we pull the arrow back in the bow, as we read the scripture, does not reflect on the integrity of the scriptures themselves. We may tremble out of awe and love for God; or because we are human and fallible. That doesn't mean the scriptures are perfect or made out of a single whole cloth; no, as we have discussed many times, the scriptures were woven together over thousands of years out of many fragments by many authors. Some parts of the Pentateuch or Torah are helpful; others are not, particularly when they are divorced from their historical contexts.

Until the middle of the 19th century it was believed that the Pentateuch itself was written, not by Moses as Jews once believed, but by four traditions, referred to with the initials JEPD:

- the Yahwist (abbreviated J from the German word for Yahwist)
- the Elohist (abbreviated E)
- the Deuteronomist (abbreviated D)
- the Priestly (abbreviated P)

There are ways to see each of these threads in the Old Testament, but that is a topic for another day. And on top of that we have many authors, in the New Testament, most of whom are also unknown. Perhaps it is better to think of the scriptures collectively as being more similar to carbon fiber than a single piece of wood or metal out of which a simpler arrow might be made.

We as readers, and certainly, I as one of many preachers that have stood in this pulpit, may miss the target, due to our shortcomings. But the target, which is the truth of about God and how one relates to God, is unchanged, although, I must say, it is highly contextual. And even the target, the truth about God and how one relates to God, is NOT God. It merely points to God. God exists even beyond the truth about God. I am reminded of the words of the old hymn:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

So to recap, the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible is like an arrow, which we aim toward the truth about God. The Torah, a word having its roots in archery, is information and instructions about the truth about God and our relationships with God. That is its value. This ties directly back to last week's sermon, when I asked the question, "how are we to live our lives?" I ask myself this question, "how are we to live our lives?", every time I prepare to preach.

The Levites were one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The book of Leviticus is priestly instruction; hence its name. The Levites were a tribe descended from Aaron, who served as the priestly companion to Moses. Where else have we heard that name? One example is Levi Strauss, an American Jewish businessman who began making jeans in San Francisco in 1853.

But back to Leviticus. Chapter 19 begins with words very similar to the 10 commandments, a representation of which you can see on the screen.

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. Honor your mother and father, keep the Sabbath; I am the Lord your God. Do not worship idols. Don't steal or lie or swear. Don't put obstacles in front of differently abled persons, so that they stumble.

There are practical reasons not to do these things. They are essential to a well-functioning and good human society. Be good to everyone and love God. That makes sense. But something stood out for me as I read this passage last week. Here – Jill and I will demonstrate.

Kevin: You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my Sabbath.

Jill: I am the Lord your God.

Kevin: Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves.

Jill: I am the Lord your God.

Kevin: You shall leave the gleanings from the harvest.

Jill: I am the Lord your God.

Kevin: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jill: I am the Lord your God.

Over and over again – I am the Lord your God.

God doesn't speak in the voice of Charleston Heston, George Burns, or Morgan Freeman. No, God speaks in the voice of Jill Hutton, in the voice of undocumented workers, stooped over as they harvested vegetables in the storms in Monterey this week. God speaks in each of your voices and actions as well.

God speaks in the voice of our own consciences. We know what we are to do, our parents trained us well. But why are we to do the right thing? Not just because the Bible, the arrow aimed at the truth of God, tells us so. Being afraid of God is not a sufficient reason to follow God's commandments.

No, we live our lives in accordance with God's commandments because we honor God. To love our neighbors is to love God.

We can recognize the 10 commandments in Chapter 19 of Leviticus, and see the parallels between this chapter and similar verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

But then today's scripture veers off in a new and important direction: I don't know if they used scythes back then, but let's imagine they did. If you can you are using a scythe to harvest a field of wheat, the commandment is that we are not to cut all the way to the edge of the field. Nor are we to be sure to meticulously pick up every head of wheat. Instead we are to leave some behind.

Poor people, who didn't have the right to harvest on land themselves would wait until you and I cut the wheat, probably on land we rented from the landowner.

Then the poor would come onto the fields after we left. First they would pick up the stalks and heads of wheat we left behind, or the "gleanings". Then they would harvest the edge of the fields, the stalks we left behind for them. This grain, that which we deliberately left behind, would enable them to do their own harvesting and thus, live.

The same principle was applied to vineyards. We were commanded to leave some grapes behind and to not pick up grapes which fell. We were commanded by God to leave them for the poor and the alien. Other words for alien are foreigner or immigrant.

How many of you have had vegetable gardens? My family did as well.

And you know what I noticed as a child? Potatoes and ears of corn grew in different sizes, some carrots were a bit twisted, and apples might have a spot or even a worm inside them. But we ate them anyway, right?

Today, half of all food raised is allowed to rot in fields or is discarded. Half, isn't that unbelievable? Not to mention the labor, water and fertilizer used. Why? because you and I as consumers expect our fruits and vegetables to be perfect, without blemishes, and all of about the same size. These misshapen fruits and vegetables could be today's gleanings. Certainly the poor need them!

According to the EPA, discarded food is biggest single component of landfill, and a growing source of methane. More importantly, this is food hungry people in this country and around the world need, to feed themselves. What can we do? There are a few things:

- 1) There are campaigns underway to convince Walmart and Costco to sell “ugly fruit and vegetables”; fruit and vegetables that don’t conform to exacting standards of size, shape, and color. We can be part of the ugly fruit and vegetable movement, so this food doesn’t go to waste.
- 2) It turns out there is a company in Emeryville called Imperfect Produce that will deliver a box of “cosmetically impaired” produce to your door. This is food that has slight imperfections but that is otherwise perfectly healthy. There are similar efforts underway in the UK and Canada.

These are two of many ways in which you and I can follow God’s commandments, not out of fear, but out of love for God.

The Torah, a word having its roots in archery, is information and instructions about the truth about God and our relationships with God.

God is holy, and since we are children of God, we too, are inherently holy. Leviticus, in the middle of the Torah, points us in the direction of that truth and in the direction of God.

So far I have managed to stay within the Old Testament. But as I prepared my sermon on Friday I also remembered a poignant passage from the Gospel of John, which Jill and I are going to act out. I will be Simon Peter and Jill will be Jesus, just as she was the voice of God earlier.

Do you remember what I said about gleanings, about leaving food for others so that they might live? Jesus also had something to say about this.

Kevin: When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

Jill: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’

Kevin: ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’

Jill: ‘Feed my lambs.’ ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

Kevin: ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’

Jill: ‘Tend my sheep.’ ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

Kevin: Peter felt hurt because he asked him the third time, ‘do you love me’?

‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’

Jill: ‘Feed my sheep.’

It is important to live out our faith. In James 2 we read, “faith without works is dead.” Sycamore is a James 2 church. There are a zillion different ways that we do, from making beautiful cards, to growing plants or pulling weeds, to tracking our expenses. Some of you like to feed people, not only for fundraisers, but also simply because some of our neighbors are hungry. That’s the kind of ministry you have done through GRIP.

What I witnessed when I was at GRIP (and I am thinking of you, Reiko, Toom, Muts, our Nichigo members and friends of Sycamore) is that those of you that were there, really enjoyed the experience. You enjoyed both preparing the meal and being able to feed hungry people

delicious and healthy food. You were living out the Gospel message in a tangible way. You were like archers, following the arrow of scripture all the way to the target – the truth of God’s love for everyone.

Do you love Jesus?

Jill: Feed my lambs.

Kevin: Amen.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.