

## **“Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic, and Respect”**

Exodus 19:17-25; Romans 13:8-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 30, 2015 – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

We live in cynical times. As a result we don't tend to be very hopeful for today, and even less so for the future. The naysayers contend our best days are over, though it was nice while it lasted. We're going to have to work harder just to try to keep our income where it is now. Pollution, crime, and medical costs will all increase. And, as to our trust in politicians....

Television and the movies reflect these feelings and, possibly, even accelerate them. Older people are often portrayed as eccentric, clueless, and ineffective. Parents are often seen as out of touch, inept, caught up solely with their own needs. Children in our entertainment media quite regularly have to engage in a battle of wits with the enemy—their own mothers and fathers.

Business and personal relationships certainly don't come off any better. In stories everyone's unfaithful or about to be. The Golden Rule of business is "Do unto others before they stick it to you." All bosses are selfish and scheming, all cops are crooked, all teachers have an unhealthy sexual interest in their students. Few people are to be trusted and, even they, will probably let you down.

Even God doesn't come off much better in TV or in the movies. In fact, God's name is hardly ever mentioned, except to be taken in vain. When people of faith are shown in stories, much of the time they are characterized as naive dupes. Clergy are charlatans.

As adults we can't help but be influenced to at least some extent by the images we see reinforced over and over again. What's more sobering is that our children may be molded by these portrayals. What are we teaching our young in today society? That force is the way to make things happen? That deceit and deception are acceptable means to a desired end? That my needs always supersede your needs?

What happens when people lose respect for their institutions, their leaders, the law, each other, and even themselves? What happens when they lose respect for their Creator? Maybe I'm painting a bleaker picture here than need be, but you understand what I'm getting at.

Now I'm not advocating censorship as a way to deal with the problem, though we need to be aware of these many strong influences over our lives. And we certainly need to exercise care over what our children are exposed to daily. Awareness is a beginning point.

How do our scriptures this morning speak to these concerns? The Old Testament reading is about Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the exodus into the wilderness. Just before the beginning of our passage the text tells us this: "On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai... and camped there before the mountain.

"Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the House of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'"

And then Moses is instructed to prepare the people, for the Lord will become known to them from the summit of Mount Sinai. While God remains shrouded in a cloud and speaks out of thunder, the people show great reverence as is befitting. All arrogance is lost now as the people come before this revelation of the Almighty. They do the appropriate thing for creatures now suddenly confronted by their creator: they stand in awe and respect.

In the New Testament God is revealed as more approachable through the person of Jesus. Yet even Christ doesn't come to God matter-of-factly nor does he encourage us to do that either. While we may understand God to be more of a loving parent than a detached deity; still, respect is due. And everything that attaches to God, is likewise due that same respect.

One man today recalls this from the past: "As a child I was taught respect by my parents in such rudimentary ways as not running inside a church sanctuary or climbing over the chancel altar rail. This carried over into our home where we children were taught not to place anything on top of the Bible.

"I chafed under those restrictions when I wanted to join other children racing through the pews as our parents socialized following worship, but now I appreciate the lessons of respect given to me. To this day, whenever I enter a sanctuary I get a sense of awe and well-being that I wouldn't if I had not been taught to respect the place of worship."

I think there's a lot to be said here. A sanctuary is not just another room, but it is truly sacred space. Not in the sense of something magical or other-worldly; yet, here we meet God in a special way. It isn't so much the walls or the windows or the furnishings which sets this room off, but the realization that, here, God has been worshiped for almost 40 years. Even if it were 40 days, there would still be a special quality about this space.

Prayers are lifted up within these walls, songs of praise are sung by joyful hearts, sermons are preached from the Word, children are baptized by water and the Spirit, and marriages are celebrated and solemnized. This is not just another room, not even just another room in this building. And yet, if God is due reverence here, is not God due respect everywhere?

What wonderful assurance we find that we are loved. What a privilege to discover we can talk with the Lord as to a parent. Still, God is God. There is a distance of role and place that must be remembered. Respect forms the basis of our relationship to God. We hear this in our Old Testament reading this morning.

Our epistle text lifts up another kind of respect. Paul writes: "Be under obligation to no one—the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever has done this has obeyed the Law. The commandments... are summed up in the one command, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law."

The apostle's letter reminds us that, in our personal relationships, there must be respect, too. Putting people down, refusing to recognize their personhood, ignoring their legitimate needs, or demeaning them in any manner are not proper ways of treating others. Jesus shows us an alternative: to love others as we love ourselves; to care about others as we care about ourselves; to do for people as we, ourselves, would like to be treated.

Shortly before he died, George Burns said, "I was always taught to respect my elders and now I've reached the age when I don't have anybody left to respect." Maybe we'll be given some latitude when we get to 100, but up until then we have standards to be met. Respect for others is one of them.

Christianity brought a whole new ethic of relationships into being. The old ways were no longer good enough. A higher level was both taught and expected.

How different the world would be today if all persons truly lived by Christ's words. It would be different in the workplace, in school, in our neighborhoods, and driving the freeways. Such a simple thing as genuine respect would go a long way in settling our differences and establishing a greater degree of trust between people. If we all were to take seriously the reverence due God and the respect owed people, we would find the way that life is intended to be lived.

As Christians we need to be very clear about the message we proclaim and the work we perform. It used to be that there were vast areas of darkness in the world, great numbers who had not heard about Christ, and so we rightly engaged in missionary activity to bring this life-saving word to people. The frontier was around the edges of where Christianity was already known and practiced. Now Africa and Asia send missionaries to America and Europe. For the most part, the Word has been heard in the world.

Today, in a sense, the greater frontier of life is right here with us. It is in our cynical, violence-directed, selfish, power-hungry modern society. Yes, the world has heard the Word but it does not yet act upon the Word.

Respect is as basic to life as any of the core areas taught in school; regrettably, no one has yet come up with a standardized test that would measure for this. Perhaps a little less content on other subjects might give us students who are a bit more practiced in interpersonal concern and relations. It might be a good trade-off and transform our communities.

For now faithful folks need to create a difference where they are. Our job is to make an impact close at hand. Our calling is to live exemplary lives and to reach out as far as we can to show that another way, another approach to life, is possible. Where we are able, we need to link hands with others likewise committed.

The antidote to today's cynicism and sense of being lost, of fatalism and despair, is to be found in reverence to God and respect for others. The message for us this morning is to resist being swept away by these prevailing negative tides, and instead to ground and root ourselves in faith so that we can stand firm. Once we do that, and build upon it, we become part of the solution rather than symbolic of the problem.