

March 21, 2024

Daily Reflections

Journeying through Lent



Center for Spiritual Development

COVENANT AND CONTEXT

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Excerpts from Today's First Reading and Gospel

When Abram prostrated himself, God spoke to him: "My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you. I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting pact, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."

GENESIS 17:3-7

"You do not know him, but I know him. And if I should say that I do not know him, I would be like you a liar. But I do know him and I keep his word. Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM."

Reflection

Throughout the history of the people of Israel, from the time of Moses to that of Jesus, the notion of covenant was central to the identity of the people and their experienced connection of God. In the modern era, to speak of *covenant* is to highlight something profound, with a depth appropriate to such a commitment. In the early years of the Hebrews, God's covenant connection was as large as life itself, but also as intimate and particular as the details of day-to-day living and cultural practice. It seems almost anomalous to the modern mind that the seventeenth chapter of Genesis, which exalted the Abrahamic lineage to a perpetual status in God's eyes (the change of name from Abram [exalted father] to Abraham [father of multitudes]), spent the bulk of its attention in the second half to the practice and religious significance of ritual male circumcision. The emerging Mosaic law also devoted a great deal of attention to minute details, from food preparation to the qualities required of a person's clothing. The mixture of the cosmic and the domestic provided a unique quality to the people's walk with their God.

By the time of Jesus, this unique covenantal model was well-integrated into the religious, social, and familial identity of the Jewish communities. With familiarity came the predictable squabbling about the nature and authority of each and every dictate of the law in daily living. Jesus came under severe criticism for his violations of sabbath rest in healing the suffering souls around him, even those who had been afflicted for decades. His willingness to socialize with those who were excluded (tax collectors and others banned from Jewish society) indicated a wider vision of the nature and application of the law. When he spoke with the authority of God's merciful compassion, he was accused of blasphemy. Jesus' prophetic identity as messiah did not subvert the law. It simply offered a wider vision of God's covenant relationship with the people, one which embraced human realities rather than dictating religious responses. Jesus located his authority in the circle of love, above the reign of legality.

In our own communities of faith, we confront the same friction between mandates and mercy, between the demands of law and the demands of love. There are those who choose alignment with the forms and dictates of faith, and those who embrace the healing grace of love in our human encounters. Jesus recognized the need for 'law' to provide useful boundaries for behavior and relationship. Yet, he always chose to offer comfort and healing in the face of human suffering. His discernment in love provides us a lens through which to view our own calling as ministers of compassion. Law provides us with a

discipline for life. Mercy empowers us to respond with the freedom of the God whose love reigns above all else.



Norbertine Chapel
Photo by David Robinson, SJ

For Pondering

- How do you understand the role of 'law' in your life of faith?
- How would you discern the authority of love in your day-to-day interactions with those who stand 'outside' your social and cultural circles?
- What does it mean to you to say that you are a 'loving' person?

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