

Nov. 5, 2017

Lesson 10: God's Covenant with the Returned Exiles

Scripture: Numbers 25; 1 Samuel 2: 27:36

Context:

This week's scripture lesson moves to a series that focuses on more personal covenants. In previous weeks, we have examined how God enters into relationship with humanity as groups of people. From this point forward, the focus will be on a personal level.

The main focus of today's lesson comes from a book rarely studied: the book of Numbers. Often Numbers is glossed over in study as others opt to study the book of Exodus with its exciting escape from Egypt or the book of Joshua that celebrates the entry of the people back into the Promised Land. Numbers actually has quite a bit of drama and acts as a transition piece between the last of those to exit Egypt and the new generation that will be the ones to inherit the land.

In the chapter for today, we have the Israelites poised for greatness as they are about to enter the land. From chapter twenty-three we read of how they have large numbers and that God has even given them an army to defeat any tribe that comes their way.¹ But things start to go awry after Balaam's prophesizes they will enter the Promised Land in chapter twenty-four. While at a place called Shittim in the plains of Moab, the Israelite men begin to worship a god name Baal Peor and engage in cultic prostitution with Moabite women. Soon, the whole camp follows and once again the Israelites bow down to a crafted god. A plague comes through and begins to wipe out the population.

There are commandments given to the judges to take out the people who worshipped Baal Peor and chiefs who engaged are to be impaled. But matters continue to get worse when an Israelite leader Zimrion, of house Simeon, proceeds to bring a Midianite woman into the camp. Scholars believe that the biggest violation was not marrying an outsider, but in bringing a foreign woman into a tent that was housing the sacred objects, which broke other commandments about who was allowed in the tent.² In the course of it all, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron leaves the tent and returns with a spear to kill the woman and the man, and stops the plague from spreading.

As a reward, Phinehas and his descendants are called into a covenant of perpetual priesthood for his service and zeal. God declares that it was Phinehas' involvement that stopped the Israelites from being swept away. The Midianites become the next group that the Israelites will pursue as a result of the whole affair.

This story in Numbers 25 is given to contrast what takes place in 2 Samuel in with another priest named Phinehas, son of Eli. This Phinehas is found to be taking parts of the sacrifice not prescribed to priests and sleeping with the women who helped out in Temple.³ Eli counseled them, but then did nothing to follow up on their behavior. He continued to allow them to give the portion of food that was not theirs to eat. Eventually, God sends him a message that his descendants will no longer be the priestly house and

¹ Numbers 23, NRSV.

² Commentary from Wesley Study Bible; Numbers 25.

³ 1 Samuel 2:12-17 and 1 Samuel 2: 12.

that the family will fall into disgrace. Instead, a new priest will arise and be the one who is God's trustworthy servant. This Phinehas will not carry on with the priestly line.

Application:

These are not the most uplifting stories of scripture, but they are ones that emphasize to us that our service to God is built upon integrity and fidelity to our commitments to God and to others. In the case of the Israelites, Zimri, Eli's son Phinehas and Hophni, there was a breaking of the covenant as they all engaged in things that did not honor God. The Israelites worshipped a foreign god and slept with prostitutes, Zimri had sexual relations with a woman in a sacred place, and Eli's sons chose not to honor the rituals and traditions of the Temple.

In contrast Phinehas, son of Eleazar, did honor God by standing up in the midst of it all and making a statement. While we may be shocked by the violent nature of his actions, (and probably wouldn't want that at a SPR meeting,) we are reminded that sometimes sticking to our guns means that people will not always be happy. Even people that we love sometimes need to be addressed in a way that helps them see that they too haven't been keeping their commitment to God or to others.

For some reason, when I read this passage, I started to think about the way that the church handles conflict and change. Often we don't do well with either. Recently, I read a book *Failure of Nerve* by Edwin Friedman. This leadership book focuses on systems theories and how anytime a group or organization needs to change there is often pushback by those who want to justify certain behaviors or systems that are in place. "Well you know it'll make so and so mad if we change or if we make this decision. We can't afford to do that because they'll pitch a fit." If you have narcissists in your family or friend group, you can also identify. They function on making the system revolve around them without anyone holding them accountable. The rest of the family can go to family counseling, but they are so perfect, so why would they even have to do so? Clearly, the issue isn't about them; just the fact that the world doesn't revolve around them.

When we refuse to think about change or how our actions and attitudes affect others, then we are also disrespecting God and the nudge of the Holy Spirit. As disciples of Christ, we all made a commitment when we joined the church to order our life after the example of Christ and to uphold our vows to uphold the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Being a Christian means being honest about the times that we mess up and the times that we people please instead of listening to that inner voice that directs us to go in a direction that is healthier for the whole of a group and honors God. What if we were to all look at the commitments we made to God and did some introspection, who would we be like? Would we be like Phinehas, son of Eleazar, who chose to listen for God and keep the commandments even when everyone goes astray? Or would we be like Phinehas, son of Eli, who acquiesced to the culture around him and forgot that God does call for us to think about our commitments and the responsibilities we've been given? The choice is ours. God will love us always, but we are called to honor God with our commitments and the respect we give to other relationships.

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