

Back to Basics

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The abrupt turn of our national political economy toward uncritical populism (with a tilt toward fascism) has bewildered many preachers including this one. That turn has made preaching for many of us even more difficult and demanding because ideological sensibilities are so acute, and every utterance seems freighted with risk. That turn, however, has also made preaching more urgent because it signifies that we are in a time of forgetfulness, or what Michael Fishbane has called “mindlessness.”¹ It is as though in raw and ready ideological dispute, we have forgotten the glue of the national good. And a spin-off of that forgetfulness means that we have to some extent in the church forgotten the ties that bind us in the gospel to the living God and to each other.

I.

In such a season of forgetfulness (mindlessness), I suggest that we preachers must go back to the basics of what we must remember that we have forgotten. Or in Fishbane’s parlance, we must be intentionally “mindful” in a context of pathological mindlessness. When we go back to basics, I propose that we may (without being excessively didactic) bear witness to the ethical completion of the good news or, in Bonhoeffer’s language, that we may exposit the “cost of discipleship.” My impression is that with a generous accent on God’s good grace, we are in sum very close to “cheap grace” in order to reassure and comfort in a way that requires no costly or even inconvenient decision. The ethical completion of the gospel tradition is everywhere evident. It is voiced at Sinai in response to the Decalogue: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:7).

In Jesus’ ministry it is “follow me” that means to cease to follow the path of Rome: “Jesus calls us o’er the tumult of our life’s wild restless sea; day by day his sweet voice soundeth saying, ‘Christian follow me.’”² In Paul’s language, it is to be “of the same mind” that means to “look to the interest of others” (Philippians 2: 4-5) that our minds may be renewed and transformed with what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). Cultural Christianity among us comes packaged as a reassurance that there is no compelling “ask” in the gospel, or the “ask” among right-wing Christians is simply an echo of dominant cultural values. In truth, however, the gospel is a summons to be different, think differently, imagine differently, save, spend, and invest differently, and act differently. I recognize that in exploring the “cost” of discipleship, it is futile in most venues to focus on current hot-button issues; better in my judgment to go back to basics that lie behind such issues.

The “basics” concerning “cost” are most succinctly put in the two “great commandments” (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28). In Mark they asked Jesus for the first commandment; he answered, “You cannot have one; you get two.” You cannot separate God and human reality. In response to Jesus, the scribe conceded that all the punctilious requirements of piety count for nothing in the face of the two commandments. In Luke the lawyer knows the answer, and Jesus promises

him that the two commandments will bring life; the negative implication, I take it, is that neglect of these two commandments will inescapably bring a death. In Matthew, Jesus concludes his response by affirming, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40). The "law and prophets" refers to the Torah of Moses (law) and the prophetic corpus, that is, in sum, the "canonical" tradition of Judaism. To say it all "hangs" on these two commandments evokes the interpretive verdict of Paul who, it turns out, is not so fixed on grace that he cannot notice the commandments: "For the whole law [Torah] is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself....' "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 5:14, 6:2). Paul seems indeed to reduce the two great commandments to one, but for Paul the first is surely implied and assumed in the second. Thus I propose that a preacher who seeks to be a pedagogue about the "cost" might spend energy expositing the two great commandments that together constitute the mark of difference for those who have been called to discipleship. Such an exposition can avoid simplistic reductions and over time can fully articulate the riskiness of an alternative life in gospel faith. Over time this would also entail a recovery of baptism as a serious world-changing sacrament.³

II.

The first great commandment, love of God, is quoted in the gospel from Deuteronomy 6:5. This gives the preacher an opportunity to help the congregation rediscover (or discover for the first time) the book of Deuteronomy. It may also be that the preacher will discover Deuteronomy for the first time. Clearly for almost all church people the book of Deuteronomy is part of an undifferentiated mass of old stuff easily dismissed. But "back to basics" surely requires that the preacher must spend time in the book of Deuteronomy, because that book is the dynamic center of covenantal theology that was actively on the horizon of Jesus and the early church.

A beginning point is to discern the dynamic tradition that the book of Deuteronomy practices and embodies. The book is clearly rooted in the old Mosaic memory and so is presented as the teaching of Moses. The work of Moses in this belated text is to rearticulate the covenant for a new time, place, and circumstance, namely, life in the land of promise. Thus at the outset, Moses is said to "expound" this Torah (1:5). That is, Moses expounded the old memory of Sinai, and by expounding he gave fresh articulation and extended the rule of God into spheres of life that were not in purview at Sinai.

In 5:3, moreover, Moses declares, "Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today." Moses indicates that the dynamism of the covenant requires on-going imaginative interpretation that precludes any package of fundamentalism or the certitudes of "originalism." The book of Deuteronomy is exactly such imaginative interpretation that transposes the covenant for a context of royal power and a predatory political economy, perhaps in the eighth century BCE.

The core mandate of the covenant is exactly "love of God": "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:5). But then Moses, in Deuteronomy, proceeds to show at great length that "love" means obedience to the commandments (12-25). This extended corpus of commands discloses the character and will of the God whom we are to love fully, without reser-

vation, by our intentional, disciplined acts. That is, love is a *praxis*, action informed by the normative narrative of covenant to which we have sworn allegiance.

Our “love of God” reflects, is responsive to, and corresponds to the character of this God who is disclosed here, and we say more fully in Jesus of Nazareth. For starters we may identify three marks of this covenantal God that are to inform our obedience.

1. The God of covenant is a *forgiving* God who “restores the fortunes” after God’s people have been wayward and recalcitrant (Deuteronomy 30:3; for use of the same phrase see Jeremiah 29:14, 30:3, 33:7, 11, 26). In response, God’s people are to be a forgiving people. This is evident in what is the core command of Deuteronomy, “the year of releases” in Deuteronomy 15:1-18. It is provided that debts should be cancelled, most particularly on poor people, every seven years. This commandment shows that “forgiveness” is elementally an economic process that concerns the forgiveness of debts. Thus in one version of the Lord’s Prayer, we pray that our debts may be forgiven. God does not want anyone to be permanently in hock. God does not want there to be a permanent underclass in hopeless debt; God intends that our economy should be subordinated to and in the service of covenantal neighborliness.

This mandate of forgiveness is voiced (then and now) in a debt-propelled economy in which the “haves” depend upon the cheap labor of the “have-nots” and keep the “have-nots” permanently in debt so that they can be devoured by interest rates (see Deut. 23:19-20). It is clear that Moses encountered resistance to this radical act of forgiveness, for he declares that God’s people should not be “hard-hearted or tight-fisted” when it comes to forgiveness of debts (15:7). The antithesis of forgiveness is *book-keeping* or score-keeping in which careful records are kept (at least in memory) so that we know who owes whom, who has offended whom, and who must “make payment,” whether monetary or relational.⁴ This book-keeping mentality allows no slippage for human need or vulnerability, but requires full unadjusted paying up. Thus the poor must “earn food stamps,” immigrants must “qualify,” and those who default end with eviction, deportation, or imprisonment.⁵ Covenant people are to act differently as an act of love of God not only in face-to-face dealings, but in policy formation so that a forgiving community and a debt-cancelling economy are acts of “love of God.”

2. The God of covenant is a *God of hospitality* who welcomes into the community and into the political economy those who are inconvenient. This is the God who “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18). Imagine God making provision for food and clothing for those outside “the tribe”! That provision, moreover, is said to be an “execution of justice,” so that the needs of orphan, widow, and immigrant are not charity, but a just right. From this it promptly follows that the covenant people is to act as YHWH acts: “You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:19). The faithful are to replicate the hospitable action of God. As a result, the commandments of Deuteronomy are preoccupied with practical hospitality toward the vulnerable (the poor, widow, orphan, immigrant) who by their presence are “entitled” to economic viability (Deuteronomy 24:10-15, 17-22). The resources of the community are to be distributed not on the basis of power, but on the basis of presence and need.

This act of mandated hospitality toward the vulnerable is contrasted with the

condescension of “charity.”⁶ Charity, that so many people and so many congregations embrace, is not a serious recognition of the legitimate claims of the needy, but only a gesture of patronage by the “haves” out of their surplus that can be done without cost or much inconvenience. Moses clearly has in mind covenantal hospitality that is committed to justice and not to condescending patronage. Thus the commandments make provision for the protection and performance of the “right” of the vulnerable that goes well beyond charity.

3. The God of covenant is a *God of generosity*: “The Lord God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you...” (Deuteronomy 30:9). The sermonic rhetoric of Moses functions to remind the covenant people that all that they have is a gift of God’s goodness:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant... (6:10-11).

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied..., do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.”

But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth... (8:12-13, 17-18).

Imagining that one is self-made and self-sufficient can lead to cynical parsimony: the money is mine; I don’t owe anything to anyone.” The propensity in our predatory economy to deny generosity toward the vulnerable is a function of the illusion self-sufficiency in which the awareness of the “neighbor” disappears from consciousness. We then enjoy a torrent of self-congratulatory, self-preoccupied greed that regards the needy neighbor as a threat, not entitled to any generosity. The impetus for generosity, in the rhetoric of Moses, is found in the awareness that God is the creator who gives all good gifts. (“We give thee but thine own.”) These gifts are to be shared generously as the creator has been generous.

The tradition of Deuteronomy incessantly warns about “other gods” who are precluded by the first commandment of Sinai, “No other gods” (Exodus 20:3-6, Deut. 5:6-10). In Deuteronomy the “other gods” are ciphers for all that oppose the covenant God of forgiveness, hospitality, and generosity. The cipher “Canaanite” signifies a social practice that reduces all relations to monetary transactions and reduces all neighbors to commodities. Thus the “religion of Baal” comes with the socio-economic practices of *bookkeeping* (not forgiveness), *charity* (not hospitality), and *parsimony* (not generosity). The religious symbols of Baal are to be destroyed because they are icons of the commoditization of human relationships and thus the denial of neighborly attentiveness (Deut. 7:5).

It requires no imagination at all to see that our own contemporary monetization of social relationships (concerning health care, tax policy, bank deregulation) serves to enhance the powerful with endless expansion of economic resources at the expense

of the vulnerable who are without resources. Such monetization of social reality permits and authorizes the endless predatory exploitation of the vulnerable other. In the midst of that economy where we now live, to “love God” is a mighty alternative to the idols, an act that intends to interrupt such practice and policy.

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world’s golden store,
from each idol that would keep us, saying, “*Christian, love me more.*”
In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures, “*Christian, love me more than
these.*”

Thus the Torah of Deuteronomy, a first guideline on how to “love God,” is a “glimpse of a new order that is the kingdom of God.”⁷ The “kingdom of God” is not a never-never land of “life after death” as we so easily conclude when we reduce faith to “spiritual” matters to the neglect of the material. It is rather an alternative practice of social relationships that corresponds to the social practices of the covenantal God. I propose that a “back to the basics” invites the preacher to exposit “love of God.” It is unnecessary and unhelpful for the preacher to take sides or speak about the great theoretical codes of capitalism, socialism, etc., for those dogmas constitute a distraction from the first great commandment to love God without reservation. There is more to be said about the first great commandment than is offered in the book of Deuteronomy. That book, nevertheless, is a poignant place from which to begin. Since the scroll remains unopened in much of the church, this may be a fresh pedagogical moment in which the preacher can replicate Ezra: “So they read from the book, from the Torah of God, with interpretation. They gave sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8).

III.

The second great commandment, love of neighbor, is quoted in the gospels from Leviticus 19.⁸ This gives the preacher a chance to help the congregation rediscover (or discover for the first time) the book of Leviticus. It may also be that the preacher will discover it for the first time. Clearly for almost all church people, the book of Leviticus is part of an undifferentiated, a disregarded, mass of old stuff readily dismissed. The only exception is that we may pick out a few preferred verses from the book, as for example Leviticus 18 with which to flail gays. But “back to basics” surely means that the preacher must spend time in the book of Leviticus because it is a launching pad for an ongoing disputatious reflection on the holiness of God’s people, a question that was actively on the horizon of Jesus. Thus his dispute in Mark 7:1-23 on “what goes in” and “what comes out” as defiling is all about holiness. When we recite the creed, moreover, we affirm the “one *holy*, catholic and apostolic church,” surely without excessive reflection on holiness.

The point for the preacher is that God’s people (the baptized community) are called to holiness that corresponds to the holiness of God: “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The verses that immediately follow allude to the commandment on honoring mother and father, keeping Sabbath, and refusing idols and images (vv. 3-4). We may assume that the remainder of the Decalogue is also implied in the statement, so that “holiness” comes to mean keeping Torah.

The book of Leviticus constitutes a long reflection on the form holiness may take for the people of God; clearly the book reflects an ongoing dispute among the priests about the nature of holiness, a discussion and dispute that continues among us. I suggest that one important question about holiness concerns one's posture toward "the other." There is ample evidence in the book of Leviticus that holiness requires careful avoidance of the *other* because the other will defile and contaminate. Thus holiness runs in the direction of cleanness and purity.⁹ As is readily recognized, Leviticus 19 is peculiarly and strategically positioned between chapters 18 and 20 that are preoccupied with prohibited "distorted" sexual relationships. And even in chapter 19, we get worry about possible dangerous "mixing": "You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials" (v. 19).¹⁰ From this fear of "mixing," it is an easy step to human "mixing." Thus later on, in the interest of maintaining a "holy tribe," Ezra is warned about the danger that "the holy seed (semen) has been mixed" (Ezra 9:2). Such a concern is surely an anticipation of modern fears about "mixed races." And while all of that seems old fashioned in an embarrassing way, Bill Bishop, in his book *The Big Sort* has chronicled the way in which "red" and "blue" people are self-selecting to like-minded communities of work, housing, and worship; conservatives and liberals currently want to live in communities of pure ideology...echoes of the holiness agenda of Ezra!¹¹

It is clear in Leviticus 19, however, that there is a counter-point of holiness that purposes a very different way with "the other." I suggest that we might perceive in holiness tradition a continuing escalation and expansion of positive engagement with the other, an engagement that anticipates the judgment of Emmanuel Levinas that the "face of the other" is where we meet the truth of our lives.¹²

1. The commandment of 19:18, quoted in the gospels, alludes to *love of self* along with love of neighbor. There is no doubt that the covenantal tradition advocates a healthy self-respect, a self-respect that is reflected and voiced in the lament Psalms that freely state before God the legitimate claims of the self.¹³ Such a healthy sense of self that is indispensable for generative love of neighbor is very different from the narcissistic self-indulgence of so much of our selfie culture. Healthy self-regard as a component of holiness does not need always to advertise and exhibit the self. Such exhibits are not necessary when the self is healthy.

2. But of course the commandment of 19:18 is occupied with the neighbor: *Love neighbor* as much as self! "Neighbor," in the tradition, means fellow members of the covenant community, all its members who are distinguished from "foreigners" who are not neighbors. But of course the tradition and most especially Jesus keeps the question open: "Who is my neighbor?" and continues to expand the zone of neighborliness. But even before that zone is greatly expanded, this trajectory of interpretation envisions a neighborhood for the common good in which the self is not free to keep from the neighborhood what is required for viability, thus "with justice you shall judge your neighbor" (v. 15). Holiness is characterized as justice for the neighbor, a practice that assures viable sustenance for all the neighbors! The same accent, moreover, is clear in the tenth commandment that sounds the word *neighbor* three times in its prohibition of acquisitiveness: "You shall not covet your *neighbor's* house; you shall not covet your *neighbor's* wife, or male or female slave or ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your *neighbor*" (Exodus 20:17). And in our much cited verse 18, love of

neighbor is a counter to vengeance or grudge, thus affirming the legitimacy of the neighbor. It is, moreover, remarkable that this accent on neighbor is situated exactly in the holiness tradition. Thus engagement with the neighbor is a way to “take time to be holy.” This teaching surely witnesses against the holiness trajectory of purity and cleanness that accents disengagement from the neighbor who may contaminate.

3. This vision of love of neighbor is pushed further in our chapter with attentiveness to the *poor neighbor*: “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” (19:10).

The poor have a special claim on the community that has obligation to provide an adequate safety net that precludes all “laws of enclosure.” Indeed care for the poor is seen in the tradition to be an equivalent to knowledge of God: “He [the king] judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. ‘Is this not to know me?’ says the Lord”(Jeremiah 22:16). The wisdom tradition, moreover, sees the special linkage of the poor to God: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker; but those who are kind to the needy honor him (Proverbs 14:11).

It is an easy step from here to the instruction of Jesus, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

4. While the “poor” are noticed and supported by the community, the text reaches further toward “the other” with reference to *the immigrant (alien)*.¹⁴ The immigrant is named along with the poor in verse 10. But more important is this: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (v. 34). The phrasing is exactly the same as in verse 18: “neighbor as yourself,” “immigrant as yourself”!

Verse 34 is quite remarkable. Holiness means embrace of the other who is not a member of “our tribe.” Though the holiness tradition of Leviticus does not go further, we notice in Deuteronomy that along with the immigrant come *the widow and orphan*, so that we may take this triad of the vulnerable as the ultimate agenda of holiness. Holiness has to do, in this trajectory, with restorative practices toward the vulnerable who have been diminished by the hard-hearted, tight-fisted practices of predation.

5. To be sure this tradition in the Hebrew Bible does not go as far as “love your *enemy*,” an extension of Torah that was voiced by Jesus. “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44). It is worth noting that this paragraph of instruction by Jesus ends in this way: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (v. 48). This is a quote from Leviticus 19:2. Jesus links *love of enemy* to *the imperative to be holy!* Thus we may see that this mapping of the other imagines an always extended, always expanding zone of neighborliness that constitutes holiness: *self...neighbor...poor...immigrant (widow and orphan)...enemy!* In his assault on the punctilious piety of the “scribes and Pharisees,” moreover, Jesus attests that the weightier matters of the Torah (that is, the practice of holiness) consist not in scrupulous tithing but in “justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23-24). Jesus continues to up-end the holiness tradition, an impulse already activated in Leviticus 19.

The preacher may reflect on the “task of othering” that belongs to holiness and may acknowledge the vigorous contestation in which folks (all of us!) are engaged:

the other as neighbor or the other as threat. I commend *The Clash Within* in which Martha Nussbaum considers the way in which each of us hosts “a clash within” concerning the *welcome* of the other and *fear* of the other.¹⁵ That “clash,” suggests Nussbaum, is inescapable. What matters is how we manage it; it will be managed in more healthy ways when it is named and processed in honest ways. The matter of the *other* remains unsettled for each of us; for that reason the issue compels attention from the preacher. The covenantal tradition, even in Leviticus, has a dynamic notion of “othering,” and there is no more urgent issue now before our society with its propensity to exclusionary fear and tribal anxiety. There is more to be said about “love of neighbor” than Leviticus 19. But this is a teachable place in which to begin.

IV.

“Back to basics” means, I suggest, articulating and processing the profound either/or of our baptisms, an either/or as old as Moses, as urgent as Jesus, and as contemporary among us as the recognition of our monetized political economy. I have found most helpful the either/or of Paul’s articulation of “the desires of the flesh” and “the fruit of the spirit.” I am deeply informed by the discussion of Brigitte Kahl who understands Paul’s discussion of “the law” in Galatians as a challenge to the Roman Empire (and even, I extrapolate, as a challenge to the US “law of money and sex”).¹⁶ That is, the “law” that preoccupies Paul is not the Torah of Judaism but the rule and expectation of the empire. The empire of Rome had its requirements and expectations for making it big in the empire; the requirement was readiness to participate in a predatory political economy. That dominant value system, everywhere imposed, specialized in “the desires of the flesh” that consisted in mean-spirited self-promotion and uncaring self-indulgence. The empire functioned to generate appetites that could be satisfied only by anti-neighborly action. Paul offers an inventory of behaviors that arise from the embrace of such appetites: “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing, and things like these” (Galatians 5:19-21). It will require some careful pedagogy to let people see that “the desires of the flesh” are not simply drugs, alcohol, and sex, but are practices of anti-neighborliness that put the satiation of the self at the center of reality. Paul’s awareness is that one cannot subscribe to the values of the predatory economy of sex and money and not have these social outcomes.

The baptismal alternative is to refuse participation in that dominant value system (a refusal enacted by Daniel in Daniel 1) in order to practice an alternative of covenantal neighborliness toward the neighbor, the poor, the immigrant, and the enemy. Neighborliness requires a refusal of the militarized consumerism that is justified by US exceptionalism, even as Rome knew itself to be “exceptional.”¹⁷ Opting for neighborliness (love of neighbor) yields the fruit of the spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians 5:22-23). As Paul knew, one cannot have that “fruit” while participating in the dominant “law” of the empire.

It is the work of the preacher to connect the dots. Our participation in the dominant system is so “normal” that we do not notice. As a result our life is caught up in endless TV ads, mostly concerning new cars and more drugs that will kill us. It is assumed among us that more consumer goods will make us happy. It is assumed

that more aggressive militarism will make us safe. It is assumed that more soccer practices will make us more ready for college applications. It is assumed that more spectator sports will give us companionship. It is assumed that anger toward Muslims is appropriate and can be unrestrained. All of these assumptions are sponsored by the empire and are regarded as “normal.” It is assumed that it is ok to treat the other as a commodity or as an object without merit who qualifies for no respect, compassion, or justice. It is remarkable that Paul frames his catalogues of “desires of the flesh” and “fruit of the spirit” by these two remarkable neighbor assertions that I have cited above: “For the whole Torah is summed up in a single commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself....Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 5:14, 6:2).

Kahl concludes:

Apart from the works of imperial law, these faith works of love for Paul are indispensable, an insight that has been obscured by the abstract Protestant antithesis of faith versus works. Love of neighbor as yourself as the complete fulfillment of Torah (5:14) and the “new” law of Christ (5:6; 6:2) does not abandon Jewish law as such but rather the competitive and combative hierarchy of self and other that is at the core of Roman imperial *nomos*.¹⁸

It is the *nomos* of the US empire that is on offer as alternative to the two great commandments. That alternative, as we are now seeing so unmistakably, is lethal and makes a functioning humane community impossible.

This is a “back to basics” and on three counts. First, these slices of tradition and these elemental texts (Deuteronomy, Leviticus) are not known or available in the church, surely not in the lectionary. Second, the dots are not connected in the dominant narrative of the empire, and the empire has a great stake in making sure that they remain unconnected. Third, the two great commandments, with their enormous public implications, are themselves pre-political. They are in themselves accessible and without immense grand theory or ideology. They are “on the ground” elemental spin-offs of affirming that we are “sealed as Christ’s own forever.”

The task of the preacher, I propose, is to connect us to these old mandates of the tradition and to connect the dots from there to contemporary social reality and to the contemporary attitudes, actions, and policies that arise from these connections. To do this urgent pedagogy, I think, will require preachers to do textual study in more attentive ways and to read more widely concerning “the empire of force” that so compels us.¹⁹ I am aware that preachers do not have time for all of this. I wonder if the urgency of our context where God has put us requires an intentional shifting of priorities for the preacher to consider what the people of God now most require for living out our baptisms in faithful ways. “Back to basics” arises as an urgent task from the awareness that the truth entrusted to us contradicts the dominant narrative of imperial exceptionalism.

Notes

1 Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

2 “Jesus Call us,” lyrics by Cecil Frances Alexander, *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 720.

- 3 Attention should be paid to the forthcoming book of Alan Streett, *Caesar and the Sacrament: Baptism A Rite of Resistance* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017). Streett proposes that in quite explicit ways baptism in the early church imitated imperial practice and served as an alternative to the imperial rite that it imitated.
- 4 I am grateful to Peter Block who suggested to me the term *bookkeeping* as an antithesis to forgiveness.
- 5 See Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016).
- 6 I am grateful to John McKnight who suggested to me the term “charity” as an antithesis to hospitality.
- 7 Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (JSOT Supp. 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 502.
- 8 See Lenn Evan Goodman, *Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 9 See Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011).
- 10 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2005), has established a major thesis that impurity and profanation in the old holiness codes was constituted by having things out of place, in the wrong place, or mixed with other things inappropriately.
- 11 Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- 13 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 94-97 on “Is Self-love Legitimate?”
- 14 On the “stranger,” see Frank Spina, “Israelites as Gerim, ‘Sojourners’ in Historical and Sociological Perspective,” *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* ed. by Carol Meyers and Michael O’Connor (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 321-335.
- 15 Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard university, 2008).
- 16 Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2010).
- 17 Robert Paarlberg, *The United States of Excess: Gluttony and the Dark Side of American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) has shown the way in which US Exceptionalism lies behind the national epidemic of obesity.
- 18 Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, 271-272.
- 19 See James Boyd White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).