

Levites in the Modern World

1 Peter 2:4-10; Hebrews 9:11-15

Last week before Communion, we noticed that, on the weekend of the Derby Fair, our campus here at Jerusalem Corners begins to take on the appearance of the ancient tent compound where Israel worshiped God during the centuries between Moses and Solomon. The Israelite tabernacle in the wilderness was a wide yard with tent walls around the edge through which were gates where people were allowed to approach God, not very close if you were a foreigner, and only a little closer if you were a woman or a child. Israelite men were allowed to gather within sight and earshot of a relatively small Holy Tent, only a little larger than our own sanctuary.

But even the men of Israel were not allowed in the tent, inside the holy places.

The Holy Tent in Israel was comprised of two rooms. Through the front entry, ordinary priests could enter the first room which was called the Holy Place, a room with a candelabra, and an incense altar and a table where fresh bread and fine wine were placed before the Lord, new, every single day. But only the priests could enter to trim the lamp and to replace the bread and the drink and to light the incense altar to pray.

And behind the curtain, behind the table there was a second room called the Holy of holies and there only one man, Israel's high priest, was allowed to enter once a year to pour a blood offering on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant and to pray that God would forgive his people all the silly and ignorant sins they'd committed that year. And I said last week that, outside the tent, it was like a sacred Woodstock, tens of thousands of men, streaming through the courtyard, bowing and praying, excited and awestruck to be within sight and earshot of the place where the Almighty lived.

But to enter the holy place, to see what inside those walls you had to be descended from Moses' brother Aaron. To work anywhere in the compound, you had to be descended from Levi, who was the third of Jacob's twelve sons. The point being that God chose in those days who was allowed to see and hear and smell and handle the symbols of holiness. So the leaders and saints, the kings and prophets who belonged to the other tribes were not allowed in, could not lead worship or handle what was sacred no matter how brave or smart or devout they were.

Which was ironic because the father of Israel's sacred tribe, Levi, received the honor precisely because he was not a devout or even a particularly stable man. In Genesis 34, we learn that Levi was a hot head, who conspired with his brother Simeon to exterminate a whole tribe of Canaanites because one of their princes had disrespected their sister, Jacob's daughter, Dinah. Now their father Jacob had taken a different view of the situation and, in their fury, the two brothers betrayed a settlement that their father had made with the young Canaanite prince.

It would turn out to be the first in a parade of cruel, bloody-minded stunts the sons of Jacob would pull on their way to becoming the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Now the first thing

to say is that, despite all this, God didn't give up on them. God treated Jacob and his wives and children and grandchildren with grace, even using Joseph, whom all his brothers had betrayed, to bring the whole Israelite family to safety and reconciliation in Egypt near the end of Jacob's life.

And so it was in Egypt that all the brothers had to stand at Jacob's death bed and hear what their father thought of them and his prophecies as to what would become of them and each of their tribes after them. It turns out that the old man had a surprisingly good memory which was not good if you were Levi and Simeon.

Years after the fact, Jacob remembered the heartbreak and scandal their violence had caused. So, in Genesis 49, Simeon and Levi had to stand at their father's bed and listen to a prophecy that left their tribes no land, no distinct place to live in the Promised Land "*I will divide them in Jacob...I will scatter them in Israel.*", their father had prophesied. As it eventually turned out, the tribe of Simeon would simply disappear, absorbed by the larger, more prominent tribes around them. But Jacob's prophecy to Levi turned out to be something more double-edged.

Far from disappearing, God was going to move Levi's descendants center stage in his plan to use Israel to save the whole world. Moses, Israel's first writing prophet, and Aaron, Israel's first priest, both were descended from Levi. It follows that between Moses and Christ, no one lawfully worshiped God, no one celebrated a birth or a harvest, or a healing, no one was whole or clean, no one gained forgiveness or was free to start over with God unless someone descended from Levi and Aaron formally proclaimed it so.

The Levites didn't own any stretch of land or belong to any particular place, but the Israel's Law commanded that they were to be welcomed and honored wherever God people lived. The Levites lived in cities of refuge spaced within Israel's boundaries so that feuds between tribes and families among God's people could be impartially judged before they spun into violence and tragedy. They were not powerful, not really in charge anywhere but they were influential everywhere. In a sense you could say they were salt spread among God's people in the centuries before Christ.

And the reason we should pay attention to who the Levites were and what God gave them to do is that Jesus in the gospels and the Apostles in the rest of the New Testament teach us time and again that we are to our neighbors in the modern world what the Levites were to their neighbors in the land of Israel. I think Christ had priests and Levites in mind when he called us lights in the world, salt among our neighbors, a city on a hill.

The point being that God has not called us to be powerful, to own the landscape and to rule our neighbors and to run an agenda as if God's plan to save the world depended on our wits and strength and character. To the contrary, the Levites and priests were entrusted with worship, because their father's antics disqualified them from owning and ruling and running anything. They would have to settle for leading worship which would turn out to be the greatest honor of all.

One of the reasons I love Old Testament stories is that God starts with people who are ordinary and, as they worship and follow him, he turns them in someone special despite themselves. Jacob's birthname means grabby and he spent much of his life grabbing and swindling till the angel of the Lord grabbed him on his way into the Holy Land and turned him into Israel, the man who wrestles with God. Moses saved God's people from slavery, and led them to freedom and taught them right from wrong, but he himself was disqualified from ever setting a foot in the Promised Land by a fit of temper.

The point being that what we are when we start is not the critical matter. The critical work of saving a people and building a kingdom, forgiving people's sins and changing people's lives is all being done by Christ beyond the veil where ordinary priests are not allowed to go. In heaven where Christ stands is the place where sins are forgiven and prayers are answered, the place from which God's angels and his Spirit are sent on errands whose progress we cannot see, but whose outcome changes everything.

But we for now are in that first room, on this side of the veil, feasting on the bread that speaks of Christ's presence, taking in the wine that speaks forgiveness for what's gone wrong in our hearts, learning and sharing and living out that gospel that is preparing us to live one day where Christ has gone. We are Levites, priests scattered by Christ like salt all over the world and the worship we offer makes each of our sanctuaries a Holy Place, bread and wine, light and incense, closer to heaven than any of us imagine.

What's ironic is that we've drifted to a point where we've come to think that other things matter more than the faithfulness and loyalty we exercise when we worship God together in the holy places he's made for us. We think that other activities are more relevant and decisive than the time we spend together waiting on our side of the veil for guidance and blessing from the Christ who stands before the Father in the place where destinies are really made. To the extent we think that some associations or activity of ours transcends worship we have missed the point of what Christ is and does and that is the error that the book of Hebrews was written to correct.