

***Honoring God***  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Sermon by Dan Schrock  
February 17, 2013  
Lent 1

*When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.*

## I

I grew up on a dairy farm, where one of our favorite pastimes was talking about neighboring farmers. We told stories about the three Schalliol brothers who lived on the farms north of us. We talked about the Vandecaers who lived on the next farm east of us. We chatted about the Hahns and Hunsbergers who lived south of us. Farmers in that community constantly watched each other, noticing how other farmers did things and what equipment they used, looking for information they could use in conversation with other people.

We talked a lot about one neighbor in particular. This particular farmer wore tattered, dirty overalls. His buildings were in bad shape. His cows were so dirty that he had trouble qualifying as a grade A milk producer. He milked at odd, irregular hours, a habit that stresses the cows. People who knew him well said he was so sloppy he tracked manure onto his wife's clean floors. When he got to church on Sunday mornings, he always slept and sometimes snored through the service. In the eyes of the other farmers, this man had very little honor. The neighbors did not respect him or his farming practices. They thought he lived in a shameful way.

By contrast, my grandfather had a sense of high personal honor. When he planted a corn field, the rows were almost perfectly straight. His yard was regularly mowed and raked. His pickup truck and especially his car were impeccably clean. He kept his cows and milking equipment so clean that the government milk inspector often said our milk had a lower bacteria count than anyone else's in the area.

He was fastidious about his personal appearance. Even at the end of a day of hard work, his overalls still looked neat and clean. Nevertheless, before he drove off to buy a part for the machinery or fertilizer for the fields, he insisted on changing into clean clothes before he left to the store. If it was late in the day, sometimes he'd even shave before he went shopping, even though he had already shaved that morning. His dress shirts were perfectly ironed so that the sleeves had no creases at the top or bottom.

He was also scrupulous about keeping his word. If he promised something to somebody, he would follow through on that promise, even if it meant losing money.

In short, Herman Schrock was a man of honor. He cared what other people thought of him and how they talked about him. One of his lifelong goals was to avoid doing anything that would bring shame on himself or his family.

## II

This Lent, our worship materials from the Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada are organized around the theme of “Ashamed No More.” The Mennonites from Saskatchewan who prepared these materials correctly realized that the dynamics of honor and shame pervade the Bible. In fact, we can’t adequately understand the Bible unless we know something about the culture of honor and shame. So throughout our sermons, Marilyn and I will be paying attention to the dynamics of honor and shame in the passages we preach on. Since this is the first sermon in the series, I want to introduce you to what honor and shame are about, since most of us aren’t very familiar with them.

If we were Mennonites in Asia or Latin America, we wouldn’t need to have this conversation because people in those cultures already know about honor and shame. They live and breathe this because their cultures are more organized around honor and shame than our culture is. We in North America are more familiar with the dynamics of guilt. When we do something wrong, many of us get a guilty conscience. If we cheat on our income taxes, we’ll probably feel guilty afterward. We might even contact the IRS and admit we cheated. Our guilty conscience would bother us until we did something to fix what we did.

In an honor-shame culture, people who cheat on their taxes probably wouldn't feel guilty afterward. They'd just go on with life and never give the cheating another thought—unless they got caught. If they got caught, then they would feel ashamed. If, for example, a revenue agent came knocking on their front door, if their name was published in the paper along with other tax cheats, or if they were sued in court for tax evasion, then they would lose honor in the eyes of their family, friends, and neighbors. They'd lose the community's respect because their shameful actions have now become public. In an honor-shame culture, other people are always watching you, so when they find out you've done something shameful, you lose honor. If you can keep it quiet and private, you don't lose any honor. The shame only kicks in when other people know.

A hugely important value in honor-shame cultures is preserving “face,” of keeping your honor in the eyes of others. In these cultures, life is a game of getting and keeping honor. You can get more honor or you can lose it, depending on what you do.

Biblical writers and their original readers lived in cultures where people thought constantly about honor and shame. Take for instance the story of David and Goliath. When we Westerners read this story, we often interpret it using our cultural assumptions. We emphasize how young and weak David is, and how big and strong Goliath is; and then we turn it into a story about how the little guy beats the big bully. Well, that's all true, but readers in cultures where honor-shame is important may think of a different interpretation. They probably understand this as a story about honor. When Goliath publicly taunts the Israelite army and makes them afraid to fight, Goliath acquires more honor while the Israelites are shamed. Once David arrives on the scene, he immediately sees what's going on and wants to fight Goliath, mostly because he wants to rescue Israel's honor. If he can kill Goliath, then Israel gets honor while the Philistines slink away in shame. From this perspective, the story tells how David saved his nation's honor. He was a hero not so much because he was young, but because he rescued his fellow compatriots from public shame.

### III

Another important thing for us to understand is that in some parts of the Bible, God is said to care about honor too. Humans aren't the only ones who care about honor; the gods, including Yahweh, are said to care about it too.

An illustration of this appears in Deuteronomy 26:1-11, our text for today. This text instructs the Israelite farmers on what they're supposed to do when they enter the land of Canaan, make homesteads, and start farming. At harvest, they should take the first fruits of their land and offer them to God in gratitude for all the wonderful things God has done for them, especially for rescuing them from oppression in Egypt. Essentially this text instructs Israelite farmers how to worship God. Verse 8 reminds these farmers that God "brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders."

From the viewpoint of honor and shame, God acquired a huge amount of honor by rescuing the Israelites from Egypt. In the 10 plagues of locusts, frogs, and so on (Exodus 7-12), and in the dramatic rescue at the Sea of Reeds (14-15), God shamed Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. Pharaoh and the many Egyptian gods proved to be powerless against Yahweh. In this contest, Egypt lost honor and the victorious Yahweh gained it.

That's why Yahweh is worthy of worship by these Israelite farmers. Yahweh is honorable. Yahweh is powerful. Yahweh is glorious. And whenever Israel worshipped Yahweh, they further enhanced God's honor. In worship they proclaimed that Yahweh is more honorable than any Egyptian or Canaanite gods. Their first-fruits offering, along with their words of praise and acclamation, burnished Yahweh's honorable reputation.



#### IV

My grandfather cultivated his honor in the local farming community. In doing so, he unconsciously imitated what people in the biblical era had been doing for thousands of years. But he also gave honor to God through regular worship at Olive Mennonite Church where he was a life-long member, and through the integrity and gentleness that he tried to convey in his everyday life as a farmer.

In what ways do you give honor to God? What do you do, or what do you say, that elevates God's honor in the eyes of other people? How do you elevate God?