

To Be Holy Like God

Sermon October 25, 2020

David Griswold

St. Columba's Church

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-11, 15-18, 33-34

"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19: 2). These can seem like stern, impossibly demanding words to guide us on a Sunday morning, and they come from what one rabbi calls "the most avoided book in the Bible." (Harris, 2013, p. xvii). In a search for inspiration, Leviticus is probably not too many people's go-to book. And its purpose – to serve as a manual to teach people how to be holy like God – seems far removed from our modern experience of faith.

This third book of the Bible presents a dense thicket of laws to ensure that holiness is present in all aspects of life of the people Moses is leading to the promised land. But the laws of Leviticus can strike modern Christians as archaic, pointless and in many cases, unjust, and they make for some of the dullest reading in the Bible. One scholar recalls a seminary student who reported "I never realized I could fall asleep on a treadmill until I did so while trying to read Leviticus." (Schifferdecker, 2014, no pages).

Looking for the proper ways to make sacrificial offerings? Leviticus spells them out in voluminous detail. Wondering if it is okay to get a tattoo, or to eat shellfish, or to wear clothing made from two kinds of fabric? All of these are prohibited. Are you a child who is prone to cursing your parents? Think again: in Leviticus this is not only prohibited but a capital offense.

Leviticus exempts no part of life from the attention of a micromanaging God. And while some of its rules seem merely arcane and irrelevant, others have lingered to cast a divisive, hurtful shadow over how people understand the reach of God's love. The practice of slavery, for instance, is tolerated. And as a gay man I spent many years unsure of where I stood with God, in part due to a few verses in Leviticus and the ways in which some in the church interpret them. I came to feel as hostile toward this book of the Bible as I felt it was toward me.

So why read it now? At a time when anxiety weighs heavily on the national mood, Leviticus seems an improbable choice for Christians seeking to live God's love today.

And yet like the people setting out with Moses, we are also waiting to reach a promised land where the goodness and justice of God are reflected in the life we build together. Can it be that this call for God's people to be holy can help us get closer to our promised land? Jesus thought so. Avoided today, Leviticus was must-reading for Jesus, whose earthly identity was shaped by the core Jewish teachings of Torah-- the law--and the prophets. Today's reading is an opportunity to look over Jesus' shoulder as he studies a key passage in a book that helped to shape his vision of the Kingdom of God.

What can it mean for people to be holy, as God is? Today we might think of a holy person as one who is uncommonly devout, saintly, perhaps a model of moral

virtue --someone the rest of us might admire but never hope to emulate. But in the Bible as Jesus reads it, holy means separate – set apart in sacredness, shielded from what defiles. In this sense, to be holy means to have a nature that’s unsullied by such worldly impulses as pride, self-concern and willfulness.

In these verses written centuries before his time, Jesus discovers a truth that is easy for us to overlook – that God wants us to be holy not as pious individuals who are distant from one another but instead as a group whose collective expression of God’s love is a blessing for all. We practice God’s holiness by moving toward others as a community that bears God’s holy image. Speaking through Moses, God calls us to see that signs of holiness are to be found in how people treat one another in everyday life. Expanding on the Ten Commandments, God calls the people to avoid slander and vengeance, to behave with fairness and impartiality, to bury hateful feelings.

Unlike any other code of laws in the ancient world, God’s law calls not only for just behavior but a caring heart too. It is not surprising to hear God warn us against lying, cheating and stealing. But here God goes further: holiness is shown not only in honest behavior but in love of neighbor – a call for both justice and empathy.

We can imagine Jesus thinking about these verses as he walks among the struggling, oppressed people of Roman-occupied Palestine – people who yearn to see and feel the holiness and love of God. The holiness called for in Leviticus contributes to Jesus’ vision of a holy kingdom in which our relationship to God and our relationship to our neighbor are bound together.

One of the most famous questions Jesus will be asked in his ministry is, “who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10: 29). As Jesus reads Leviticus, he finds words that shape his response. God’s command “love your neighbor” means more than showing compassion for people we know and like. Leviticus expands the idea of “neighbor” by reminding us to welcome the outsider. God says the immigrant or foreigner “who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you...to be loved as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (19: 34).

God’s people, delivered from oppression, must remember to extend care to displaced people who seek refuge among them. The memory of their own time of crisis and rescue must instill empathy that reflects the love of God. And the visitor isn’t merely to be tolerated, but loved-- drawn in to full membership in the community’s life.

In this agrarian culture, a household economy is to be organized not only around the needs of a landowner but the needs of the poor and the immigrant who rely on a share of the harvest and its remnants through gleaning – the retrieval of surplus produce left unharvested. Gleaning offered barely enough food to survive on. But by reserving a portion of the harvest for the poor, the community lived with the constant reminder that all are dependent on God and the prosperous cannot remain detached from the experience of those who are in need.

Not merely a call for the well-off to provide charity for the vulnerable, this is a call to rethink how we understand what belongs to us out of the resources given to all as a gift by God.

More than a daunting command, God's words "You shall be holy, for I am holy" can be seen as a call to partnership – the planting of a new society where concern for others transcends the concerns of self, so that community harmony or God's shalom can take root. Jesus comes as the embodiment of God's holiness with the promise that as we draw close to him holiness will become part of our nature and guide us through life's challenges.

In teachings like the Sermon on the Mount Jesus offers a vision of what a community of holiness looks and feels like – a new understanding of power, status and social relationships. In the Kingdom Jesus proclaims, God's unconditional love is meant for each of us, including the person we might fear, dislike or mistrust as "the other."

The call for us to share the holy nature of God recurs today during a year when evidence of holiness in the world can be hard to discern. And if empathy and interrelatedness are the qualities that communicate God's holiness, it's no surprise that signs of God's love can seem to be in short supply.

This widely shared impression is confirmed in a report published last month titled "The U.S. Has An Empathy Deficit." (Hall, 2020, no pages.) In the midst of the pandemic, job losses, a reckoning over racial injustice and our polarizing political climate, more and more people are struggling with feelings of pain, stress and anger, yet they don't believe our leaders and neighbors have concern or understanding for what they're experiencing.

A sense of foreboding hovers over our election that occurs in ten days. Many feel intense anxiety anticipating the outcome, wondering if the process will be just, and fearful that disputes and disorder could linger in the aftermath. The political divide in our country is more rancorous than ever, with those on opposite sides seeing one another not only as misguided but malevolent – not as neighbors but as enemies. An election settled to our satisfaction might bring hope to many. But no matter how it turns out, our country will remain beset by wounds and challenges that make the road to our promised land a long one.

The good news from Leviticus is that God is anxious to go there with us and has given us the inner tools to build a society where love and justice can flourish. At this intensely fraught moment in our nation, people of faith have a precious contribution to make, with our readiness to discover signs of the sacred in all aspects of life and in all people. God leads us outside ourselves equipped with empathy – moving toward others, seeing the world from where they stand and remembering that we have all experienced various forms of pain and wilderness-wandering and have yearned for welcome and healing.

Faith communities like ours are blessed to have ministries that engage us in the work of God and disciples of justice and compassion for whom Jesus' call to love God and neighbor are a way of life. And for this, thanks be to God.

Citations:

Hall, J. (2020, September 17). *The U.S. has an empathy deficit*. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-us-has-an-empathy-deficit/>

Harris, M. (2013). *Leviticus: you have no idea*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

Schifferdecker, K. (2014, October 24). *Commentary on Leviticus 19*. Retrieved from <https://workingpreacher.com>