Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday October 25, 2020

St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa

Year A

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

(Matthew 22:34-46)

**You shall be Holy**

*“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Psalm 19:14*

The book of Leviticus simply put is a book of laws and rituals. Much of it is full of stuff that no one wants to talk about. Leviticus chapters 1-10 are concerned with ancient Israel’s cultic system and particularly with the practice of sacrificial worship. Leviticus 11-16 speaks much of the messiness of human bodies. Not because bodies are bad, or morally offensive, but because human bodies with their life-and-death messiness left unchecked could pollute the sanctuary, the place where the community encounters God. [[1]](#footnote-2)

Leviticus 17-27 is referred to as the Holiness Code - holiness (and the need to be pure) now extends from the sanctuary to the land and its people. [[2]](#footnote-3)

“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy”: this call to holiness is not directed to the priests alone, but rather to “all the congregation of the people of Israel” (Leviticus 19:2).

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In Leviticus, this is an oft-repeated refrain.

Holiness is a matter of great concern to the priestly writers of Leviticus because holiness was an attribute of God, in fact, *the* attribute of God. And in order for this holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy people, a certain order needed to be maintained.

Leviticus was not just written to priests sharing with them how to be, but it was addressed to the whole people. Particularly chapters 17-26 which gives instructions to the entire community on how to maintain holiness in the community.

Holiness is no longer just spoken of as ritual cleanliness, but now

extends to personal conduct.

In chapters 17-26 of Leviticus there is no distinction between what we might call “religious” concerns and “secular” concerns.

All of life matters to God -- what we eat, how we do business, who we sleep with, how we care for the land, our relationships with family, neighbors, and strangers -- all of it matters to God. We might even say, in this strange book of Leviticus, that matter (physical stuff) matters. Which is contrary too much of our current thinking as we like to think in terms of “freedom” and that in Christ there is freedom from these laws (which there is).

In Leviticus, chapter 19, we find an odd variety of laws. Many of the Ten Commandments are here: prohibitions on idols, stealing, false witness, profaning the name of God; injunctions to keep the Sabbath and to honor one’s mother and father. But we also find laws against sowing your field with two different kinds of seed or wearing clothing made of two different materials (verse 19).

All of life matters, from seemingly trivial issues to matters of life and death.

It is here in chapter 19 that we find the most famous verse in the whole of Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 18). When asked what the greatest commandment is in our Gospel text today, Jesus quotes, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind…and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Achieving holiness requires ethical behavior, not only ritual precision. Holiness is not the responsibility of the priests alone; instead, as Jacob Milgrom says, “Israel attains it and priests sustain it.” [[3]](#footnote-4)

Holiness is dynamic, it can be achieved and lost; it requires constant vigilance. Defrauding your neighbor invites impurity just like contracting a leprous disease renders you unclean. You must keep your body in check, but you must also do what is right in the eyes of God.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Part of the Leviticus passage today says, ***“****You shall not hate in your heart any one of your kin. You* ***shall*** *reprove your neighbor or you will incur guilt yourself.”*

In any family there are differences. In the family of God there are differences, Democrats and Republicans, male and female - and there are differences with your biological kinfolk - your mother, father, cousins, sister, brother, your people.

This passage says you shall not hate in your heart any of your kin and it takes it a step forward and this is really the part that makes me uncomfortable, ***“You shall reprove your neighbor*** or you shall incur wrath or guilt yourself. We don’t like to think of reproving our neighbor. And this can be abused as any Scripture can to give those who think they are righteous a verse to hang on to so they can go meddling and say whatever they want. But there is something here that I don’t think should be overlooked.

We are accountable to one another.

I am not a big TV watcher, and I am always at least 10 years behind in watching any show that popular culture finds interesting. As part of my pandemic watching, I finally began to watch West Wing. During the last two seasons of the show, Toby Ziegler who is the White House communications director, who has been the trusted confidant of the President, a think-tank and wise counselor, one of the President’s trusted advisors, leaks classified information. He leaked classified information about a secret military space shuttle to the press and was fired for it in Season 6. It was a hard decision for the President to fire Toby, and it was hard for me to watch. Toby (who I may or may not have a TV crush on) was one of the President’s closest friends on the show. It was not an easy decision for the fictitious President Bartlett, but one he knew he had to make - Toby had to be corrected for his actions. He betrayed the President and his post. President Bartlett acted decisively and quickly - firing Toby and not accepting his resignation.

Toby was reproved. He was corrected by the President.

As Christians, we are part of a community of mutual accountability. Not just to each other and our local congregation, but to the larger Christian community and world. We need to be conscious of accountability and ask ourselves are we part of big enough communities where we are not just enforcing our narrow story.

Are we holding ourselves accountable for being the people of God?

The rest of the verse says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

If we take the context of the verse in Leviticus into account, and then repeated in the Gospel text, loving our neighbor has more to do with action than an emotion.

You must be honest in your business dealings — the rest of Leviticus 19 - don’t put your finger on the scale (verses 35-36). You must not defraud your neighbor or slander him (verses 13, 16). You must render just judgments (verse 15).

When you harvest your fields and your vineyard, you must not strip the land bare, but leave enough for the poor and the foreigners to glean and support themselves (verses 9-10; cf. the book of Ruth).

In short, “loving your neighbor as yourself’ means not just refraining from hurting your neighbor, but also willing your neighbor’s good and working for it.

In its original context in Leviticus, the term “neighbor” probably refers to a fellow Israelite. Jesus expands the definition in Luke 10 with the story of the Good Samaritan. But even within this chapter in Leviticus, a more universal understanding is also apparent. Just a few verses later, we read, “When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner.The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (19:33-34).

The ritual discussed in early Leviticus to address uncleanness of the body is visible, easily diagnosed, and readily counteracted with examination by the priests, ritual baths, and spending some time “outside the camp.” Uncleanness of the heart is less easily resolved.

The practices described in this passage name the kinds of everyday injustices that not only many of us have experienced, but also that many of us have committed.

There are perhaps dozens of times every day that we have the opportunity to look out for our neighbor, but we look out only for ourselves: we do not leave some of our income for the poor, we deal in falsehoods to save or make a little more money, we bear grudges against family and friends. These are the actions that should make us blush. Yet we often become so comfortable with our sins that we hardly even notice them.

Leviticus’ concern with impurity and holiness remains relevant today. The book brings to each of us the question: “what in your life is impeding your encounter with God?” It also brings that question to our society, our culture, and our faith as a whole.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love the foreigner as yourself. Be holy, as God is holy. This book is more than a list of sometimes arcane rules and customs. It is a profound theological statement about life with God. The laws and rituals are grounded in the reality of who God is and who God has called us to be: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Holiness is not something we can achieve ourselves. Holiness is the work of God in us, for the sake of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“You shall be holy.” It *is* both command and promise.

And to believe that promise is to begin to be formed into the people God calls us to be, a people living out in our day-to-day lives genuine love for God and for our neighbors. Amen.

1. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3165 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This discussion of purity and holiness in the book of Leviticus follows the analysis of Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus,* 3 vols., Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991-2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid., 2:1353. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The preceding two paragraphs are excerpted and adapted from a sermon preached by Cameron B.R. Howard, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. on February 23, 2011, at the School of Theology at Sewanee, the University of the South, and that was printed the same year in “Tuesday Morning,” a collection of sermon helps edited by the Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz [↑](#footnote-ref-5)