



“Holy?”

Scripture – Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, February 4, 2024

Anita was in my seventh grade History class, and I’ll bet that most of you had her in one of your classes, too. Anita *always* did what she was supposed to do. She turned in her homework assignments the day they were due - except for those times when she turned them in ahead of schedule. She always sat up straight at her desk and was ready to respond with the correct answer whenever the teacher asked a question. She never whispered to those sitting next to her and never EVER passed notes to anyone.

Anita never did anything out of line; she always did exactly what she was supposed to do. Plus, she was most helpful. If you did something out of line, she would inform the teacher. She was what Mark Twain described as “A good person, in the worst sense of the word.”

Last Sunday, we pondered the opening lines of 1st Corinthians – one of Paul’s letters to the congregation in Corinth. Paul had established the church, taught them the basics of being a follower of Jesus, and then set sail to establish other congregations. While he was carrying out his mission, he received word that they were failing miserably and splitting into factions.

In the opening lines of the letter, Paul referred to the Corinthian Christians as “saints” and said they were “sanctified in Christ” that is, made holy. Following last week’s service, one of you said that you struggled with the notion that we are holy and worthy of the title “saint.” Despite knowing better, too often we excel at jealousy and selfishness.

As you might guess, the word “holy” appears multiple times in the Bible. In your mind, guess how many times. 200? 400? I conducted a word search and discovered that the word “holy” appears more than 700 times.

However, the word has lost its shine and become tainted for many of us. Talk of holiness often evokes an image of someone who is holier-than-thou. Someone who parades their virtues. And rather than imitating someone like that, we have the urge to do exactly the opposite. Yet, if we overcome the notion of a super-righteous goody-goody who is too obnoxious to bear, we may discover that this biblical term “holy” is actually the path to a rich life.

Today's reading comes from a book of the Bible most of us rarely engage. Be honest: Raise your hand if you have read a passage from Leviticus in the past two months. The book is routinely passed over because it contains a number of ancient instructions that sound not only irrelevant to contemporary ears, but at times fall somewhere between silly and bizarre.

The book makes constant references to throwing blood on the altar. Not exactly a typical Presbyterian practice. If you are skittish about blood, beware, because it is mentioned more than 60 times. However, if you would like to know how to burn incense properly or diagnose leprosy, this is your book.

If you enjoy bacon you will need to skip a few chapters; eating pork is strictly forbidden. Bottom line: If the Book of Leviticus is one of your favorites, I wouldn't tell anyone.

However, sometimes a gem appears where you least expect it, and today's passage is a priceless jewel. It echoes most of the Ten Commandments, but goes well beyond simple dos and don'ts. God speaks to Moses and tells him what to say to the community of faith. God says, "**You** shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

The second half of this statement is easily grasped, the first half, not so much. We feel at home singing "Holy, holy, holy" when our focus is God. We often begin prayers with the words, "Holy God" or end them with "In your holy name." Holy is an adjective that naturally attaches itself to the Creator. What makes us squirm, is that today's passage begins by saying that **we** are to be holy.

When Camilla and I send birthday and Valentine cards to our grandchildren, we tell them that we love them and are proud of them because they are smart, kind, helpful and determined. Trust me, we have yet to tell any of them that they are *holy*!

The dilemma with portraying ourselves or someone else as holy is that the word has attracted too many unfavorable connotations. If I hear someone described as holy, I picture Anita. I imagine a sanctimonious prude or someone who is smug and insincere. Surely part of the problem is that the word holy evokes thoughts of perfection and we know no one is perfect; and anyone who tries to act as if he/she is perfect, is a fraud.

Our reading from Leviticus has a different take on what it means to be holy. It has nothing to do with hypocrisy, sanctimony or pious words. Rather, it is how God expects us to treat people.

Today's reading enumerates several commands and it is fascinating to see what receives top billing. It is not, "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me." The top command is: "You shall revere your mother and father."

God declares, "You are to be holy, as I am holy," and it begins with how you treat your parents. Basic human interaction begins with our parents. It is the arena in which we first learn how to connect and communicate with others. It is where we learn what warms our hearts and what crushes our feelings. If we get this relationship wrong, it is a struggle to get other relationships right.

Of course, there are exceptions. Parents can abuse their power or be emotional cripples. They can become unworthy of our love and esteem. But until they demonstrate through mistreatment or neglect that they do not deserve to be honored, we are to revere them. Oh, how I regret my teenage smart aleck language to my mom and dad.

After establishing the framework that holiness is focused on our treatment of others and grounded in our relationship with our parents, God says to keep the Sabbath and not allow anything to compete with God for first priority in our lives.

What it means to be holy begins with our relationship to our parents, moves to our relationship with God, and then expands to our treatment of others. And noteworthy, is that it does not begin with how we treat people we consider our equals or people that command respect because of their position.

Listen to the first mention of how we are to treat others. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 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.” (Lev. 19:9-10)

To be holy is to show compassion for people who are poor. In the agrarian culture of the ancient world, it meant leaving some of the crop for others to gather.

The passage continues with: “You shall not steal. You shall not lie or deceive. You shall not defraud your neighbor or hold back the wages of your laborer. You shall treat everyone with impartial justice. You shall not slander or hate or seek revenge.” And then, summing it all up: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus was well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. In what we call the great commandment, from the gospels, Jesus said, “Love God with your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s all right here in the 19th chapter of Leviticus, written a thousand years before the time of Jesus.

In our age of hyper-individualism, when many want to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, perhaps they reject religious faith because they recoil from any demands made of them and they fear a spotlight shining on their treatment of others. They will not strive to become holy because their basic philosophy of life is: “I am the center of the universe.”

Might we cultivate a different understanding of what it means to be holy? Sweep away notions of becoming Mother Teresa or Saint Francis. Give up the idea that it entails spending countless hours in prayer. To be holy is to desire for others what you desire for yourself. Pretty simple.

A colleague says that one of the holiest people she has ever known “was a Roman Catholic woman who cursed and smoked, but had a heart as big as the Gulf of Mexico. She started the shelter movement in Atlanta. Once she stopped a knife fight at the homeless shelter by walking between the two combatants and saying, ‘C’mon, you guys know better than this.’ And that was the end of the confrontation.”

“When a homeless man died on the street, she claimed his body, paid for the cremation, and waited for someone – friend or family – to claim his ashes. No one appeared. She drove around for weeks with his

ashes in the backseat of her car. Finally, one day she asked the rector of a downtown Episcopal church if the man's ashes could be buried in the church's memorial garden. The rector said, 'Our policies will allow only the remains of relatives to be placed here.' Without batting an eye, she said, 'Perfect, Jesse was my brother.'"¹

Who is your brother? Who is your sister?

Through Moses, God declares, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." And the place to begin is to desire for others what you desire for yourself.

NOTES

1. Joanna Adams, "Why Can't We Pull Up the Weeds?" on *Day1.org*, February 19, 2006.