

Scripture: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18 & Matthew 5:38- 48

In Leviticus, Moses goes to Mt. Sinai to receive God's Word for the people of Israel. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes to the Mount and delivers his word to the Disciples. Today, both scriptures and the challenges offered up by these Words, ask us to strive to be our better selves, to go the extra mile, to take that extra step and to live counter-culturally. I too have a word for you. And that word is we should begin with prayer. Please pray with me. Holy One, be in this place, in my words, in our thoughts and hearts. Move us in your generous love. Stretch us, challenge us, gift us with your wisdom that we might be holy as you are holy. **Amen.**

I am the Lord, I am the Lord. Sixteen times this phrase occurs in Leviticus. Which suggests it is something to which we should pay attention – what is God commanding to us? God is providing a script on how we are to act in our relations with one another. Leviticus is essentially a guide for being in relationship with God, self, and others. The “moral” code in Leviticus may talk about blood and laws and cleanliness, but these are not the point. The meaning of Leviticus is to recognize what is holy, to honor the holy in one another and the integrity of one's self and the intention to live in a holy relationship. However, loving one's neighbor, in the time of Leviticus was generally understood as fellow Israelites. It was clear that Israelites were obliged to fulfill the covenant with regard to one another, but not necessarily beyond their covenant community and beyond their neighborhood.

In Matthew, Jesus, as the New Moses, is interpreting the Jewish Laws of the day, for a new group of exiles. Jesus is speaking to his followers and those who associated the law with the powerful and who are the guardians of its precise following. Jesus is not saying the Leviticus explanation is wrong, but is an inadequate interpretation. For Jesus, the laws as outlined don't go far enough and cannot bring people into a transformational relationship with God. God's holiness

requires us to live justly and truthfully in relation to others, all others, including those beyond our neighborhoods.

It is so much more than following the letters of the law. This summons to holiness originates in the moral authority of God – I am the Lord. This obedience to God commands more than religious devotion. It requires the affirmation to be matched by action. Model obedience to God through love of others. Strengthening this motivation is the phrase, "love your neighbor *as yourself*." At the deepest level, loving others flows from the recognition that they are "like us," that they bear the image of God just as we do. In telling us to love our enemies, Jesus is not speaking of feelings, but actions that flesh out one's faithfulness. This is praying for persecutors, welcoming the outsider and loving the enemy. It is here that Jesus is extending the Leviticus codes beyond the familiar tribes of Israel. Jesus is instructing his disciples that following him will mean meeting up with those we would rather not come in contact. We will come encounter those outside of our immediate circles with whom the principles learned from Jesus we'd rather not share. And when we do we are to love them as God loves us.

Yes, the call to us as Christians is to love the way God loves - choosing to act with compassion and to love without discrimination, to expand the boundaries of our concern beyond those that are familiar to us. Holiness is not characterized by an ethereal state of being, but by how one acts in everyday places and relationships. From Leviticus, we learn that "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleaming of your harvest". In doing this, as you harvest your crop, you are choosing to leave some of the grain you have dropped and leave uncut the edges of your property so that Ruth, or some other poor soul like her, does not go to bed hungry. Jesus means exactly what he says in Matthew. "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus is

challenging his disciples to go the extra mile and to do the opposite of what seems normal and reasonable. Jesus was setting forth a set of values to which his disciples should aspire. This is difficult, but that is the point. By striving toward them we live better than we would otherwise. Jesus is asking us to go the extra mile, to go beyond the strict reading of the law and to reflect God's holiness in our everyday lives with those we know and the strangers we encounter.

The whole subject of holiness can make us uncomfortable, at least it does me. After all it is fine for God to be holy. But me, us? Everyone knows that God is holy, but we have a pretty good sense that most of us are not holy – or holy enough. What Jesus is telling us is that holiness is not reserved for God alone, or St. Francis, or Mother Theresa. We can't let our discomfort become an excuse to let ourselves off the hook. For both these scriptures remind us that we are all on the hook for being holy. God says to Moses, "speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am Holy." Everyone, the whole congregation is called to be holy. Being holy is what any person created in God's image is called to be or better put to do. The work of being holy is that: work, it is swimming against the tide of today's prevailing ways – it is to live counter-culturally – and that is not easy. Together we are stronger in living out this call of Jesus. Our lives in communities of faith help us to live counter-culturally with the Holy Spirit acting as our guide

The Good news is there are no excuses. As people of faith it is very clear – these commandments are given to us by God. Our faith makes a difference. We are called to go the extra mile - to a different kind of life - we are called to a different way.

I am the Lord your God – keeping the holy one in view is key to our become Holy. It is how we can shape our daily lives as people of God. We are to follow these words, not because of

an ethical or social commitment but because these laws were given to us by God. Let's reflect on that for a moment, let's sit with it. God is here, with us now. God is commanding us to treat others as we want to be treated, to love others as our selves. It is really that powerful and that straight-forward.

Jesus makes it clear that loving one's neighbor is integrally related to loving God. The law is God's treasure map to the blessedness for which God has claimed us. Jesus is calling for a more radical way of following. A call to the highest and best within us. To be holy is to be perfect in the way God loves, to practice the way of compassion and giving as God has demonstrated it to us in Jesus. Because this perfection has to do with love, which is self-giving, it is geared toward the other, and has little to do with our concepts of perfection. In fact, the perfect life might just be seen as the life of love for God, for self, and for others. This takes us out of our nervous self-concern into relationships within community. In fact, "the root meaning of the word 'perfect' is undivided, whole, complete. It means perfection in the sense of treating people in the same way that God treats people in the divine realm. Following the teaching of Jesus, then, leads to wholeness and completeness in all aspects of life and in all people not by focusing on the self but on living and loving the other.

We are caught in the tension between human nature and being children of God. To be perfect is to assure us that we are not alone in the world and that God continues to work in and through us. Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves. Jesus is God's concrete example of that love. Being perfect, being holy is a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God loves us – fully, richly, abundantly, and completely. We are holy because *God is holy* – I am the Lord.

The directives do not merely describe how we are to act — they serve as a powerful description of who God is and how God acts in this world. God is generous; therefore, we are to be generous. God is honest and just; therefore, we are to be honest and just. God does not hate; therefore, we do not hate. God loves *all of us*, therefore we are to love all others.

What does living a holy life look like? Jesus sums that up for us in Matthew, a holy life is embodied in love – love God, love yourself, and love others. It's about integrity and dignity and self-worth, never blaming or shaming others but being accountable for one's own thoughts, words, and behavior, working to change one's self, not others. Holiness is at least not making life difficult for somebody or standing idly by when a neighbor is in trouble. You are holy when you do not gossip or slander or hold a grudge. You are holy when you are fair to everyone equally – your neighbor and the person that aggravates you. You are holy when you are as welcoming to the immigrant as to those at the coffee hour.

You are holy when you visit the sick or infirmed. You are holy when you teach children in the way of God. Holiness is being a good employer, a good partner, a good friend. We are called to be holy in our life together, in the neighborhood and beyond. Holiness looks like Jack. Jack is a college student who works the reception desk at a Boston Hotel to help with his tuition. Last week, in the midst of the snow storms, Jack was schedule to work – there are no snow days when working in the hospitality industry. First, he needed to shovel the apartment stairs and walkway. All he had was his lone and flimsy shovel. The snow was heavy, wet and there was a lot of it. Wouldn't you know, just as he had removed enough snow to navigate to the street he received a text not to come into work. Jack friends who were passing by, encouraged him to join them for a beer. Then down the street he noticed an older woman – a stranger. She too was trying to get down the stairs of her apartment building. Yet the snow was making it impossible. She

was literally stuck – there was no moving forward. In that moment, Jack felt called to go the extra mile, to live out God’s love for the stranger and act with compassion. He took his flimsy shovel and cleared that woman’s stairs and walkway. He made sure she got safely to the T. Then he and his friends, perhaps acting counter-culturally, spent the afternoon shoveling out the residents of Mission Hill.

Living a holy life means letting our decisions be guided by the Holy Spirit. It means allowing each moment to be all it can be. Holiness is living with the goal of the Christian life in mind. Holiness is surrendering to the will of God, and at the same time, it is grasping each moment and making it all it can be, just as Jack did. Each event in our life is an opportunity to change, to grow, and to become a-better-version-of-ourselves—and that grasping of each moment is holiness. Holiness is allowing God to fill every corner of our being; that is when we truly become the-best-version-of-ourselves. Holiness is being set apart for God. It is a desire to do the will of God, and yet, the desire for holiness is itself a gift from God.

Jesus invites us to rely on him, and to see goodness as more than the Leviticus morality, more than the measured, balanced, upright life, as good as this is. Jesus shows us, in his own person, the perfection that builds on and extends holiness, the strength of the one who, in obedience to God, gives of one’s very self. Guided by the Holy Spirit, graced by Christ, let us go that extra mile as we leave this place today.

AMEN