

Lv 19:1-2, 9-18
20 February 2011

“Be Holy! Be Perfect!”

At the last session meeting, I announced that for my opening devotions, I would be using the Old Testament lesson for today: Leviticus. One of our session members pretended to yawn—or was that an actual yawn? Leviticus, with its detailed lists of regulations and rituals, often gets that response. Still, I promised that chapter 19 is different!

I began by reading the first two verses. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 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.” I’ll ask you what I asked them at the time. How does that strike you? What does it mean to be holy? What is holiness?

To me, that phrase, “be holy,” can seem like such a daunting thing, even something hopelessly impossible. I envision a scene like Charlton Heston as Moses—in the midst of a storm, with the people running for cover—while he raises his staff overhead and thunders: “Be holy!”

Now back to the meeting... We discussed a couple of ideas, and then I said I would read verses 9 to 18. (You heard them a few moments ago, so you have a head start!) We’ll look at them in just a bit, but what we learn is that holiness is very much about the way we treat each other. It’s about right relationships: relationships with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation.

In our gospel reading in Matthew 5, Jesus seems to have this in mind as the chapter ends. He makes a statement that’s parallel to the one in Leviticus. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). Hearing the command, “Be perfect,” may not sound any less intimidating than “be holy.” Still, he does tie this to our “heavenly Father.” He makes it about a loving relationship.

The Revised English Bible has an interesting spin on the verse. It reads, “There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.” Jesus is saying that perfection means not putting limits on ourselves. It means not limiting the good we can do.

This biblical idea of perfection isn’t flawlessness; nothing in creation is, or can be, flawless—certainly not we humans. No, perfection isn’t flawlessness; it’s completion. The more complete we are, the more perfect we are. (Or maybe I should say, the more completed we are, the more perfected we are.)

Some people say, “You can’t be **more** perfect—you’re either perfect, or you aren’t.” It’s like being more or less pregnant. The writers of our constitution seemed to have a different idea. After all, the preamble begins, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...” To form a more “complete” union. Maybe you get the point.

So, what does Leviticus 19 tell us about holiness? The verses in between the two parts of our lectionary reading talk about the proper way to offer a sacrifice. The verses that follow contain a miscellaneous list of laws. All of them, however, still involve life in the community. They don’t limit their interest to what one does in the privacy of one’s own mind and heart.

“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: I am the Lord your God.” Verses 9 and 10 get into the realm of economic justice. Bruce Epperly calls this “an economics of love.”¹

I think this image of gathering every morsel of the harvest—every grape from the vineyard—is one that is not unfamiliar in the Finger Lakes area. For the ancient Hebrews, the concern was that something be left for the poor and the foreigner to forage. Today, I’m not sure that it would **even be** the best use of time for the growers to make sure that every single grape had been picked up!

For us, these verses speak more to the economy in a broader sense. They speak to business practices that **take** more from the community than they **give**. They speak to ways in which we disregard human dignity and destroy the environment, both of which are gifts from God. They speak to how we tacitly support these practices by patronizing businesses that do such things.

We’re reminded that if we take this call to holiness seriously, we recognize that “all business decision-making is personal—putting people out of work, foreclosing on homes, and taking away health benefits harms persons, families, and communities.”²

“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (vv. 11-14).

Do you notice something that keeps getting repeated at the end of each little section of these laws? “I am the Lord,” or “I am the Lord your God” is a constant refrain. This phrase has been called “God’s ‘formula of self-declaration.’” It appears in this chapter more than anywhere else in the Old Testament.³ That gets to the essence of what holiness is all about. It is a quality unique to God. By ourselves, there’s no way we can be holy; we can be holy only to the extent that we share in God.

But more to the point for the Israelites, they’re reminded that it is their God, Yahweh—not some enticing idol—who requires these things of them. Or to put it another way, which better catches the spirit: it is Yahweh—not some enticing idol—who **enables** them to live this way. This wondrous way of life is made possible.

What other dimensions of life does holiness include? Verses 15 and 16 say, “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.” We enter the realm of politics and the court system.

That phrase about profiting “by the blood of your neighbor” is an especially stark one. This is serious stuff. By cheating people out of their wages, the scripture says that they’re being deprived of their life. (I suppose some of those swindled in recent years by banks “too big to fail” could tell us that!) And certainly, if we lie about someone in

¹ www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2010-2011/2011-Epiphany-VII-A.shtml

² www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2010-2011/2011-Epiphany-VII-A.shtml

³ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 261.

court—especially when they’re facing the most severe of penalties—we’re guilty of shedding blood.

I’ve heard many times that justice is political holiness. Or we could flip it around and say that political holiness is justice. And as much as God requires and invites us to do justice, that too can become one of the “enticing idols” I spoke about. The pursuit of justice, of holiness, without God, can degenerate into self-righteousness.

Do we ever do that? Do we ever pursue justice, holiness, perfection, without the humility of God? Let’s say, on the question of hydraulic fracturing in drilling for natural gas, do we simply dismiss those in favor of it as scheming day and night in search of new ways to poison the earth? Are we better than those scoundrels? (I do hope you detect the facetious nature of these questions!)

That’s the mentality that an idol can produce within us.

So far, I’ve spoken about holiness in what may seem like the really “big” arenas of life: economics, politics, and so on. Still, I hope I’ve given examples of how it touches us directly. As we turn to verses 17 and 18, the focus hits home in a really clear way.

“You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 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.”

When all is said and done, being holy—being perfect—means loving your neighbor. On this matter of being perfect, there’s a movie that comes to mind.

In 2004, Billy Bob Thornton starred in *Friday Night Lights*. He plays the head coach of a football team in Odessa, Texas: the Permian High Panthers. Every year, an enormous amount of pressure gets put on these kids to be perfect, and that includes the coach. That means being undefeated, and if they know what’s good for them, winning the state title. So we’re back to perfection as flawlessness!

During the regular season, they lose a couple of games, but their record is just good enough to qualify them for the playoffs. They take care of all the teams they meet, and they get to the championship. Unfortunately for the Panthers, the boys they’re facing play dirty, and the refs pretend like they don’t notice. At halftime, they’re way behind.

Thornton speaks to the guys about perfection. “Being perfect is not about that scoreboard out there,” he tells them. “It’s not about winning. It’s about you and your relationship with yourself, your family, and your friends. Being perfect is about being able to look your friends in the eye and know that you didn’t let them down, because you told them the truth. And that truth is, you did everything you could. There wasn’t one more thing you could’ve done. Can you live in that moment as best you can, with clear eyes, and love in your heart, with joy in your heart? If you can do that gentlemen—you’re perfect!”

They come roaring back in the second half...but, they still don’t win the game! Sometimes it takes a high school football coach to remind us that perfection, even holiness, isn’t about something that can be measured. It is indeed about relationships, relationships borne with love and joy in the heart.

I’ll ask the questions again. How does that strike you? What does it mean to be holy? What is holiness?

Does it still seem too big to get a hold of? If so, that's okay. None of us can start from anywhere except where we are. But is there anything in your life, is there any relationship, which really stands out to you as less than holy, less than perfect? There's your starting point.