

Practice Loving Your Neighbor (A Sermon for Proper 25A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Matthew 22:34-46

October 29, 2017

We usually only hear about Leviticus when people are quoting the verse that prohibits something. But there is much else in Leviticus that is strange. The opening chapters are all about blood sacrifices. Then there are detailed regulations about food and clothing and other aspects of life.

It all seems very distant to us, historically and culturally. The creators of our lectionary evidently agree with that negative assessment of Leviticus because this Sunday is the only time we read Leviticus in all three years of readings.

So why should we read Leviticus? I believe that underneath all the rules about sacrifice and purity, all the strange regulations about food and clothes, there is a vision of holiness and harmony with God that is life-giving and has the potential to speak a healing word to our fractured and alienated condition.

At the heart of Leviticus is God's command to "be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy." To live a holy life is to live in harmony with God, with our fellow human beings, and with all of creation.

All the rules and regulations in Leviticus were designed to maintain this holiness, or harmony. They touch every aspect of life. There was no concept that life could be lived in separate spheres of work, family, politics, religion, etc. There was also no concept of religion as a purely private matter as people sometimes think of it today. Rather, life was considered as a whole, and all of life was lived in the presence of God.

All of life was to be holy as God is holy.

At the heart of holiness is the ethical requirement to love your neighbor as yourself. In the gospel reading, Jesus lifts this verse from Leviticus up as the greatest commandment, along with loving God with all your heart, mind and soul.

In doing so, Jesus was firmly planted in Jewish tradition. One of the most famous rabbis, Rabbi Hillel, who lived just before Jesus, wrote that the command to love your neighbor is the entire Torah—the rest is all commentary.

To be holy is to be filled with loving kindness and compassion, just as God is. The command to love your neighbor is unconditional, and fundamental to Scripture.

So what does it mean to live a holy life in these times? How can we overcome these divisions and disjunctions in our world? How can we truly love our neighbor as ourselves?

The famous 19th century psychologist and philosopher William James once said that “If you want a quality, act as if you already have it.” In the contemporary vernacular we might say “Fake it till you make it.” The point is that attitude follows action. You don’t have to wait for some sublime, mystical experience to act as if you love your neighbor, or to act as if you love God with all of your heart and mind and soul.

Don’t wait to feel good feelings about people who anger or annoy you; treat them with compassion and mercy *now*. Don’t wait until your heart softens with forgiveness towards people who hurt or harm you; be kind and generous with them *now*.

St. Francis de Sales is said to have advised his followers that, “You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; and just so, you learn to love God and man by loving.”

Make a decision to prioritize your life as if nothing in the entire universe is more important to you than loving God and loving your neighbor, and I can assure you that by God's grace it will, in time, be true.

As we get more and more into our stewardship season here at St. Mary's, you'll start seeing 1 Peter 4:7-11 showing up. That scripture serves at the core of what we want to be and do as St. Mary's. Here's one translation:

“Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and *he'll* get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time.”

Be holy as God is holy. That seems like a tall task, doesn't it? But Jeremiah, and then Jesus, gives us a hint...”love your neighbor.” That's not a suggestion. It's not optional. And it's not qualified by “loving those you like.” It's actually rather simple...it may not be easy, but it *is* simple...

Love your neighbor as if your life depended on it.

Amen.