



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

Holy and Perfect

Sermon for 2-20-11

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

Holy and perfect? Yikes, how could that ever happen to me or to you? I want to do a bit of Bible study with you this morning to see what these terms mean and how they might relate to us. First, what does it mean to be holy? Leviticus is part of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The context of the writing is this: The Hebrew people are still in the exodus mode. They have been freed from slavery in Egypt and have not yet entered the land promised to them. Leviticus is a book of laws given to Moses from God to look ahead to that time when the exodus is finished and they have settled in to their new land. These laws describe an ideal community that is devoted to God. They tell the people to be honest in all their dealings so that everyone can live in safety. The Laws begin by identifying the different groups to which the people are to respond ethically: the poor, the foreigner, the blind, the day laborers; and then shifts to neighbor, including both those close to you—family and friends as well as those far away.

For Leviticus holiness is both human and divine. In some ways holy means set aside, different, maybe even odd. Jesus in the Sermon on The Mount certainly teaches strange, counter-cultural ways to behave. Also as we hear in the Leviticus Holiness codes, there is very much a concern for the marginalized and relates to how we love our neighbor as our self, no seeking revenge, no bering grudges no profiting at another's expense, no keeping your crops or profit to yourself. Holiness here involves relationship and intimacy; going beyond one's self to identify with the common good of all, even aliens, the strangers. I just learned Friday at a lecture that in the Hebrew



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Bible, there is only one reference to loving your neighbor but 36 references to caring for the stranger. Holiness is definitely connected with economics—leave something in your fields for the poor to glean. In today’s terms we might look at banks, corporations, and the stock market. Business practices that create poverty for some so that others’ incomes increase would be a modern day example of what Jesus is disapproving. Looking at the nation’s proposed budget cuts that will eliminate or reduce programs for global hunger and other help needed by the less advantaged along with the earlier vote retaining the tax cuts for the richest Americans is another example.

Walter Brueggemann says that “Leviticus calls us to ‘be holy’ in a way that is commensurate with God’s own holiness. The call is to a self-conscious difference in conduct, attitude, and lifestyle.” The call is away from self-preoccupation to the needs of the neighbor.

In our Gospel reading, it is Jesus that continues to explore the relevance of the Law, even ups the ante; for example, the judges of ancient Israel enacted the law of retaliation (an eye for an eye) whenever anyone was harmed, intentionally or not. Jesus admonishes his followers NOT to use violence in opposing the evil doer. Jesus’ objective was to overcome evil with good, to overcome humiliation by shaming those in power. Just as in Leviticus, Jesus makes ‘Love your Neighbor’ central to his teachings, even loving those who do you harm. Such a counterintuitive act is not easy and it requires much prayer. Our familiar Lord’s Prayer contains the theme of forgiveness for others who have wronged us as crucial to our receiving God’s forgiveness.

MLK Jr. used these teachings from Jesus, plus his exposure to Mahatma Gandhi, to develop the practice of non-violence as a means of effective protest. (next newsletter) Listen to King’s words written from a Georgia jail. After noting that hate



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is just as injurious to the hater as the hated, he says, "Of course this is not practical; life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog... My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities, which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. This does not mean that we abandon our righteous efforts. With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. ..." ¹

At the end of this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48). Eugene Petersen's translation in The Message has these words: "In a word, what I'm saying is Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

So what is all of this about being perfect? Most of us when we hear this command, think about moral perfectionism. From the Greek word telos used here the reference is to an "end" or a "purpose"--more like becoming what is intended, what God's purpose is for us. Fred Craddock says "'Perfect' can also be translated 'complete' or 'mature.' It is not here referring to moral flawlessness but to love that is not partial or immature". I agree that this type of perfection means treating others with love in the same way that God treats us with love. If we follow Jesus' teachings, we are lead to wholeness in all aspects of our life by not focusing on self but by loving the other. So to be perfect in this way means to embrace otherness, to promote reconciliation and hospitality and to seek the well-being of all. It is truly a way of

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., page 596



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being different, of being set apart from the values of a competitive capitalistic, individualistic culture, maybe a way to being holy.

It's just the opposite of some of our secular proverbs, "Don't get mad, get even:" or "Do unto others before they do unto you." When Jesus talks about loving our enemies, he is not talking about feelings but about actions. He suggests that we pray for those that persecute us and welcome outsiders. Jesus did not try to motivate us to love our enemies so that we would feel better about ourselves or that it would prove we were the better person or that God would reward us. Jesus says we are to do these things because such behavior is following the character, the example of God, who gave the Law. Petersen's translation is to "live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you." In other words, we share with others what God gives to us. God calls us his beloved and blessed children. Can we truly live in God's image by blessing each other, and becoming holy and perfect? Is there anything that gets in your way of being the loving, praying, forgiving person that God wants you to be? Is there anything that is holding you back? I want you to think about this for a couple of minutes and then, if you will, write on the enclosed paper one thing—one fear, one memory, or one hurt—that is keeping you from embracing and becoming what God wants you to be: generous, loving, holy and perfect! (Two minutes of silence) I ask you to fold the paper and put it in the offering plate so that these challenges can be presented to God along with your monetary gifts. We will pray together that God who dwells in your heart will help you overcome whatever it is that's holding you back. Maybe the symbolism of writing and presenting these papers to God will allow you to let go. Remember that you are kingdom people, blessed and beloved by God and called to be the light of the world. Go be who you are.²

² Much of this last paragraph is taken from David Lose, online at Working Preacher.



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