

February 19, 2017
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Lev. 19:1-2, 9-18; 1Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23;
Matt. 5:38-48

HOLY PEOPLE

As many of you know, for most of my adult life I was not a church person. In fact I was a none—one of those people who checks the word none when filling out a survey or form that asks for your religious affiliation. In fact, until I was 47 years old, I wasn't just unaffiliated with formal religions, I had no faith at all. James wasn't as embittered about the church as I was, but he probably would have called himself a none also. When I look back on where things began to change for us, I realize James started on a faith journey before I did, but he had enough sense not to try to change my mind—at least not overtly.

I did think it was a little odd when he decided to read the Bible cover to cover. But he has always been an intellectual who enjoys reading that challenges him—history, philosophy, science, classical literature. He was raised Presbyterian, but had never been the star of Sunday school shall we say. He had very little knowledge of what was in the Bible so he decided to read it.

Around that time we started having some conversations that I thought were just tangentially about the possibility of something sort of kind of like maybe this creator almighty God we have since come to know. One day James said you should read the Bible. Now I am here to witness, if there is no other proof that God exists, it is that I didn't just scoff at the suggestion. I picked up the Bible and started reading. And I read it cover to cover.

It took me a long time, but somewhere along the way, I realized my eyes and my heart were being opened. Somehow, I began to understand for the first time something about why people called it Good News. I was blown away by it. It is an

amazing book. It is God's revelation of God's self to humanity. It defies description.

Even if you've been going to church and Sunday school your whole life, reading the Bible straight through can be an enlightening and spiritual experience. But know this: most of the really great Bible stories are in the first two books. Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau and Jacob and Rachel and Leah. Joseph and Pharaoh, Moses and Pharaoh, Pharaoh and the plagues. Great stories with great plots, intrigue and suspense. Then, you get to Leviticus. That first time I read the Bible, I was like wait a minute. This is boring. What happened to the sex and violence?

Leviticus is known as the book of instructions. It's the big rule book. It instructs the priests on the proper rules for officiating such as the rules for purification and how to set up the sanctuary. It is the "leader's guide" for the priests by which they are to teach the people what God expects from them. It's pretty dry stuff except for the scary and brutal parts where it talks about putting people to death for things like blasphemy and adultery. [ch. 20] There is none of the adventure and romance that you get in Genesis and Exodus. On the surface, if you're a novice like I was, you have to think what in the world could this have to do with us today.

The part we read today is taken from a sub-section of Leviticus known as the "Holiness Code." 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."**

Of course God is Holy. I mean, I knew that was the theory anyway way back when I first read the Bible. We say it and sing it all the time. Who doesn't love to sing: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." Lots of the contemporary praise

music emphasizes God's holiness also. But here in Leviticus, God tells Moses: tell the people they are to be holy. We are to be a holy people.

But aren't we, as people of faith, automatically suspicious of any suggestion that humans might be holy. If you really want to insult someone, just put them in the "holier than thou" category. You know the type: You're feeling really down, or angry about some disappointment in life, and your friend nods and smiles and says: "well, I've always found that if I pray about it, things are never as bad as they seem." I don't know about you, but my response would probably be to go tell another friend that I didn't really care for that kind of "holier than thou" attitude. Admittedly, I wouldn't be feeling too holy about the whole thing, but I would get a little satisfaction in throwing out what everyone understands is a blatant insult.

But in Leviticus, God is quite clear about his expectations: You shall be holy because I am holy. How can we be holy? And then later in the Bible, Jesus says you should be perfect because God is perfect. It's the same thing. How can we do that either?

Well, God tells us how. You love your neighbor as yourself, that's all. That doesn't sound so hard. But then we read the specifics: no seeking revenge when someone has injured or affronted you; no bearing grudges (that probably includes telling friend B that friend A was "all holier than thou about it"); no showing partiality.

That is hard enough, but there is more. No profiting at another's expense. You have to pay people a fair wage for the work they do. Custodians, teachers and child care workers, elder care workers. It is really not ok for holy people to treat others like they are not valuable.

And ⁹ **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.** ¹⁰ **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:

So, not only do you not keep your own hard-earned income all to yourself, you have to make sure you provide for poor people and immigrants among you. People who are not like us. People we would just as soon not have to deal with, much less take care of. People we don't even like. We are supposed to provide for them.

Then, Jesus comes along and ups the ante once again. "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** ⁴⁴ **But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.** This is confusing. Is it even relevant to those of us who live in civilized, free countries where we suffer no persecution for our faith in Christ? Do we even have any enemies to love?

The point is that enemies can include anyone who we feel poses a threat to us. It might be personally, as when someone holds an extreme political position that is the complete opposite of our own. Or, more generally the enemy might be a collective movement that we feel is threatening our very way of life. These are enemies in 21st century America.

And, Jesus is making it clear here that loving enemies is the thing that sets his holy people apart. Most of the time, most people love their loved ones. Hence the name, loved ones. This thing that sets us apart—loving our enemies—is in fact the very foundation of our identity as the holy people of God.

And so Paul reminds us in the letter to the church in Corinth that Jesus Christ, the great enemy lover, is the very foundation of the church. And we, are the temples of God, built on that foundation. Temples. The holy places where the holy God dwells. That is who we are and what we are.

Paul understands that God's holy people might look foolish and weak and naïve in the eyes of the world: Jesus himself said the poor will always be with us. So, it might seem futile and foolish, for our little church to donate thousands of dollars to build what will be affordable housing for a single family of 4. It's not going to fix the big problem or reduce the number of homeless people. It might seem foolish to welcome refugees fleeing from famine and war when we know that for every refugee who comes into this country there are millions more, suffering in chaos and violence and we will never solve the problem by taking in more.

Yet, that is what holy people do. We house the homeless, educate and provide medical care for the poor and the refugees and immigrants—the aliens among us. Many will think we are foolish. Some might be angry and threatened when we resist the common mind-sets about how are to treat those who do not enjoy our privileges. We might feel frightened, threatened ourselves having them among us.

That is when we have to be strong enough to trust God and remember that we the ones whom God has chosen to be his holy, covenant people. We are free to decline God's offer. I spent years saying no thanks God. But if we accept we are obligated to be the holy people he calls us to be.

Can we ever be perfect? No. Of course not. Jesus knows that. But once you accept your place as a beloved child of God, there is no going back. And I am here to witness that that my friends is indeed good news. Thanks be to God.