

February 19, 2017 – Living the Holy Life

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

This morning Lesley read two scripture passages for us. The first one was from Leviticus, a book in the Hebrew Scriptures that very rarely shows up in our readings on Sunday mornings. You see Leviticus is basically a book of rules – rules about how the Israelites were supposed to worship, about what they could eat, about what they could wear. Unless you are an historian – someone who studies the cultures of ancient civilizations - it's a book that is not very relevant to how we live our lives today

But there are some exceptions. There are some verses in this book that contain wisdom that is common to all people in all times – verses like the ones that Lesley read this morning. Verses that began with the words, “YHWH told Moses to tell the entire Israelite community these things: Be holy, for I, YHWH, am holy.” YHWH, of course, was the name that the Israelites gave to their God. And YHWH said, “Be holy, for I, YHWH, am holy.

What does it mean to be holy? What does that word mean to you? (*wait for answers... sacred, perfect, moral flawlessness, set apart, associated with religion, special, untouchable.*) YHWH said, “Be holy, for I, YHWH, am holy.” How do we know when someone is holy? (*wait for answers... pray a lot, go to church, where special clothes, sit in big chairs ...*)

What does today's reading from Leviticus say about living the holy life? Well it says things like:

- Leave some of your crop for the poor;
- Do not steal;
- Do not lie;
- Do not cheat;
- Do not slander;
- Be fair and just in dealings with your neighbour;
- Don't hold a grudge or seek revenge towards your relatives.

It's like an extended version of the Ten Commandments. Its focus is on how we treat our family and the members of our community. Today's passage ends with the words, "You must love your neighbour as yourself. I am YHWH."

So maybe YHWH wasn't talking about being sacred or praying a lot or even about coming to church on Sunday morning. Maybe, when YHWH asked the people of Israel to be holy, YHWH was telling them to be an integral part of a healthy and a vibrant community.

Let's consider what Jesus said on this same topic. Jesus was sitting on a hill with his disciples and the crowds who had been following them when he said, "You may have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors."

Jesus gives several examples of how to live, including:

- When someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer the other
- If anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, hand over your coat as well
- Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go two miles.

And he finishes this passage by saying, "Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect."

Wait a minute. “Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect.”

That sounds a lot like, “Be holy, for I, YHWH, am holy.” So it looks like we are back to the same question. What does it mean to be holy or to use Jesus’ word, what does it mean to be perfect?

Well biblical scholars tell us that the Greek word that is often translated as “perfect” could also be translated as “whole” or “complete” or even “mature.” In fact, some scholars argue that the pre-Christian meaning of the word holy was wholistic well-being – to be truly healthy – not only spiritually but also mentally, physically and emotionally. Rather than being set-apart, being holy or perfect was more about being strong in body and soul, being well-rounded and connected to the whole.

At the beginning of the week, I really had no idea where I was going to go with this sermon. In fact, on Thursday evening, I went to bed knowing that I still didn’t have much idea of what I was going to talk about today. Then Friday happened. Instead of sitting down to write my sermon Friday morning, I spent the first few moments of my work day contacting the RCMP to let them know that the church had been broken into and that my computer had been stolen. A good portion of my day was spent with the police at the church and then at the RCMP station. The good news is that the thieves have already been apprehended and most of our stolen goods have been returned.

But now we as a church have been left with a really big question. How do we respond to what has happened? How do we live the holy life in this situation? As Christians, as followers of Jesus, how are we to treat those who have hurt us? Jesus said, "If anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, hand over your coat as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go two miles." How are we to respond? Do we take this literally and tell the thieves to come back because they missed taking the other computers that were in the building? Probably not in this instance. But is it enough to just let the RCMP deal with the perpetrators? In this situation what does it mean to love our enemies? What does it mean to live the holy life?

I'm wondering, "Who are these people? Why did they feel the need to steal from the church? What are the circumstances of their lives? Is there something we could do to turn these neighbours from enemies into friends? Is there some way that we could use restorative rather than retributive justice? Is there some way that we could change their lives and thus the life and health of this community, for the better?"

Like so many situations in our lives this one is not black and white. There is lots of grey. There's no obvious right answer. But at this moment, thanks to this week's scripture passages, I'm at least wondering if there is a different path forward. My heart and mind and hopefully your hearts and minds, have been opened to an alternative truth, an alternative way - a way of love and compassion. So how do we go forward living the holy life?