

TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY
Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18; 33-34
Matthew 22:34-46
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Probably one of the most misunderstood words in any language is the word “holy.” Ask anyone what the word “holy” means and you’ll get answers like, “Holy means being saintly” or “Holy means being a good person.” Both these definitions sound right but biblically speaking, they’re wrong. “Holy” doesn’t mean being saintly or perfect, but it does mean being “separated from” or in the words of the great, late 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth holy means being “wholly other,” completely beyond the created order.

Here’s a good analogy: this podium was built by Russell Bull who passed away several years ago. Russell was a gifted carpenter who enjoyed making furniture and crafts for his family and friends. Now this podium was made by Russell, but Russell isn’t part of it nor is he somehow trapped in it. In the same way the universe was created by God, but God isn’t part of the universe. Instead God is totally separate from the creation or “wholly other.”

The Bible declares God is holy. The Hebrews came to realize early on God is in no way subject to the limitations of the created order, instead God is completely above and beyond what we now call the universe. And that’s why we Presbyterians emphasize the “Sovereignty of God.” Obviously the Psalmist was blown away by this revelation, causing him to exclaim,

*O Lord, our Sovereign
how majestic is your name...
When I look at your heavens...
the moon and the stars that
you have established;
what are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*
(Psalm 8:1; 3-4)

What’s more, even God’s Hebrew name reflects the holiness of God. When Moses encountered God at the Burning Bush and was told he was the Chosen One to bring the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt, he asked God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you’ and they ask me ‘What is his name?’ what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM!” Then God said further, “Thus you shall say to the people, ‘I AM sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14)

The ancients preferred to name their gods in order to tell them apart, but the God of Abraham refused to be named. That explains why God mysteriously answered “I AM WHO I AM.”

Interesting fact: Even today we don’t know exactly how God’s Hebrew name is supposed to be properly pronounced, primarily because the Jews considered his name so sacred it was never spoken. If today you approached an Orthodox Jew and whispered the word “Yahweh,” he’d never know what you said because he never heard Yahweh’s name pronounced!

But just as God’s name was never spoken, his presence was always hidden. No one was permitted to see God. Even Moses was only allowed to see God’s back as God passed him by on Mt. Sinai, because God’s presence was too both wonderful and terrifying at the same time. Centuries later, when the temple was built in Jerusalem the most sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies believed to be God’s throne room, was separated from the rest of the temple by the same huge thick curtain referenced by Luke that was torn in half at the moment of Jesus’ death on Good Friday. No one was allowed to step into the Holy of Holies except on certain high holy days when a priest, chosen by lot, entered to offer a sacrifice. Another interesting fact: a rope was tied around his waist just in case he was overwhelmed and struck dead by God’s presence so he could then be pulled back out.

Clearly the Jews were awed whenever they contemplated the God of Abraham who released them from bondage in Egypt and led them to Mt. Sinai where Moses, on their behalf, made a covenant or contract with God. Of all the peoples of the earth this sovereign, holy God, the Lord of heaven and earth, singled them out to be his holy people.

Which now brings us back to one of today’s scripture, taken from the Book of Leviticus. Today not too many of us consider Leviticus worth reading because after all, it contains all the same endless rules and regulations obsessively observed by the scribes and Pharisees. But strangely enough by avoiding this book we cheat ourselves because, the scribes and Pharisees notwithstanding, Leviticus is filled with passages that could have been spoken by Christ himself, giving credence to the old Sunday School adage “The New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.”

Listen again carefully to the opening of this passage. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to...the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:1-2)

The implication of this proclamation is astounding! These former slaves were told they were not only set politically free, but because of their special status God set them spiritually free: “You shall become holy.”

No more pagan gods, no more human sacrifices, no more ignoring the poor, the elderly and the sick leaving them to fend for themselves. “Now you shall become holy,” wholly other from the world culturally ethically and spiritually, totally different and opposite from the way they lived before.

Not surprisingly, too often the Jewish religious authorities misinterpreted their new status as being “better than” instead of “different from” their Gentile neighbors. No wonder the prophets and later Jesus were always frustrated by the “Israel uber alles” attitudes of the Temple Priests and much later the scribes and Pharisees. The Jews were called by God to be separate but not isolated, to be servants but not superior. How else could they be a light to all the nations of the earth if they disdained and distanced themselves from the rest of the world? Somehow those who meticulously followed the letter of the law overlooked what became the conveniently forgotten primary directive God commanded through Moses:

“When an alien resides in your land you shall not oppress the alien... You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34)

These two verses especially, in the middle of Leviticus, the book of laws and rules, are a hidden seed that would ultimately come to full flower through the life and ministry of Jesus. Up until the time of Christ the almost universal belief and practice of the Jews was limited by their all too human prejudices and tribal loyalties. They misinterpreted the call to holiness the exact same way we do today, thinking holy means becoming saintly, and pious striving for moral perfection through a scrupulous practice of the Law of Moses.

But the Old Testament prophets, and later Jesus, tried to reorient God’s people back to the right understanding of holiness: becoming separated from the flawed ethics and values of this world in order to be free to embrace the terrible yet wonderful presence of God and then live your life accordingly.

That’s why holiness can’t be legislated, or even mandated, it can only be chosen by each child of God and then, by God’s grace, lived out by loving God, your neighbor and yourself.

I realize this has been a heady and wordy sermon, so I’d like to finish with a story that illustrates the premise that love, not law, changes hearts and renews a right spirit within us.

Bret Harte, the 19th century writer, authored a story entitled “The Luck of Roaring Camp.”

Roaring Camp was a rough and tumble lumber camp peopled with men of dubious character. When the only woman in town, Cherekee Sal, an Indian prostitute, died giving birth to her son, each of the men came together and pledged to care for the new born wondering if the baby was his.

Very slowly there were noticeable changes in the camp. One of the miners made the baby a cradle but then decided the cabin the baby would be living in was a mess so he cleaned it up. Another miner thought the cabin should be repaired so he organized the men so cracked windows were replaced along with new floor boards, a new roof and other improvements. Next the men decided when each took his turn to babysit he should first take a bath and wear clean clothes. What's more they agreed to stop cussing and getting drunk. They started being more civil as the loving and gentle manner they showed the baby became contagious and they behaved likewise towards each other. All these small changes added up and because of their new found love for the baby and each other Roaring Camp became a transformed community.

When Jesus was born, God began a process of reconciliation that transformed men and women wherever his gospel is preached. The old laws and regulations God gave on Mt. Sinai were suddenly seen again for the first time through the life of Jesus and for those who followed him the command to love God, your neighbor and yourself was no longer a law to be obeyed but a choice gladly made in response to his loving and holy presence.

Christ is meant to be at the heart of the Ten Commandments, otherwise the law becomes cold and legalistic. So take time to be holy. Seek out Christ and allow his holy presence to create in you new hearts and renew a right spirit within you.