

Sunday, October 23, 2011
Lectionary 30
Proper 25
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18
Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2:1–8
Matthew 22:34–46
Year A

I.N.I.

Now, I consider it a virtue to be holy. I am all for holiness, and I think you should be, too. Set apart for God is a good thing, wouldn't you say?

God is claiming God's people for holiness. *Holy people, Batman!* People are watching us to recognize the God in us.

Holy God, Batman! We are enveloped in this claim to be set apart, which means that we have a purpose and a call that is not just wherever the wind blows, or what seems most interesting at the moment, or makes us feel good.

Leviticus lays it out for the people of God, not two, not ten, but 613, count 'em, 613 commandments. This provides a construct, a framework for living under God and within the social fabric of the community.

That's nice, and so are the verses about justice, from Leviticus of all places! It says in verse 15, read today, "you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great," meaning all are equal in this community.

In verse 9 it says, "when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of the field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and alien: I am the Lord your God." That's nice, it's a built-in welfare system, where those who have don't hoard it all, and those who don't have are extended care.

In verse 19 it says "You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment

made of two different materials.” That’s nice. Wait a minute! That about mutts? And my socks are both cotton and nylon!

In verse 27 it says “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.” (beard? What beard? Uh-oh). In 28 it says ”You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead or any tattoo marks upon you: I am the Lord.” No tattoos? There goes my 25th ordination anniversary plans.

What’s a person who is striving to be holy to do?

Now, this is the set-up in today’s Gospel story. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were experts in interpreting the law. They knew every dot and tittle of the 613 commandments, and how to apply them to any number of situations.

The Sadducees already had failed to foil Jesus when they questioned him previously about the resurrection. So another Jewish group, the Pharisees, huddled up and asked him out of all the commandments, which one was the greatest?

Here is the chain-yanking answer Jesus gave: The greatest is the first: ***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*** Jesus said that it was the greatest, and he was right. But before he finished, Jesus said there is a second, ***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*** On these two, Jesus said, hang the law and the prophets. That’s like the whole Bible. So which is the greatest commandment, the first or the second? Uh-huh!

More verbal sparring occurs as Jesus plays with the Pharisees’ minds. The Pharisees rightly contend that the Messiah is to be a Son of David (Jesus was from the lineage of David, remember?). But Jesus said and he quoted, if David called the Lord *Lord*, how could he be his son? Huh?

So once again, Jesus’ opponents are silenced. They, like so many of us, focus on niggling, rather than face God, who is holy. Daniel Erlander cleverly calls walking in holiness following the **manna way**, which is to understand that God gives the world what it needs, and no more. This is the gift of the law, the spirit of the law, the law that is summed up by Jesus, the law that the Psalmist says God’s people delight in. The gift of the **manna way**, which Jesus also renewed, Erlander says, holds to qualities in balance: ***righteousness*** and ***mercy***.

Righteousness is following the words of the covenant gift, the Holy Torah, which describes the manna life, the just way to live together.

Mercy is practicing compassion towards the most vulnerable in society—the widows, orphans and sojourners. Erlander says that God understood that righteousness without mercy leads to grumpy legalism. On the other hand, mercy without righteousness leads to wishy-washy sentimentalism. (from *Manna and Mercy* p. 14)

Righteousness and mercy. Love God, and love your neighbor.

Jesus was brilliant in his repartee. This was the last time he silenced his opponents, who then plotted to silence him, once and for all. And out of his love for God, and for his neighbor, and for his enemies, Jesus himself exhibited the righteousness of God, and the mercy of God, from the cross, forgiving, breaking apart the path for a manna life for those of us that niggle, and bringing us close to God. In Jesus, holiness overtakes in suffering. Holiness is discovered in death. Holiness comes to niggling people, making us aware today that our God connection and our human connection are of the highest value.

It is in this life in Christ, this manna life that enables us to give our money and our selves. Chris Wigren gave testimony to our council last week that he was recently made aware how precious this life held in God was, and invited us to live in that thankfulness.

These past Sundays, Dan Cortright, Priscilla Melendez, and Elaine Watson spoke eloquently about their own desires for holy living, and the gifts and challenges in being in the center of those God and community relationships.

Today we honor God's prompting us to be thankful and to live in the spirit of generosity. This Stewardship Commitment Sunday means above all that we stop to envelop ourselves in the strength and excitement of God's using us as instruments for mission. We are holy, as God is holy.

The greeters, the coffeemakers, the quilters, the singers, the acolytes, the meal-makers, the ones who extend greeting and care, are stewards.

The altar guild, the Sunday School singers, the caretaker, those in Bible Study, our Yale students, are holy.

Enveloped in God's righteousness and mercy, modeled by Christ, practiced in the church, water, oil, bread, wine, and money are holy.

Holy things for holy people. I'm all for holiness. You?

I.N.I.