

February 19, 2017: The Great Invitation: Doing Holiness



Last week, we heard some tough teachings from Jesus about anger, reconciliation, respect, adultery, divorce, and honesty. We unpacked these challenging words by talking about moving beyond simply doing “good enough,” living by the laws and rules of our religion, and instead “falling in love with the lifestyle” that Jesus taught, living out the love of God in every aspect of our lives. We talked about what makes for healthy relationships, and we lifted in prayer the relationships in our lives that are suffering. Today, we pick up where we left off in the Sermon on the Mount to see what else Jesus’ message holds for us.

In each of today’s scriptures we hear the call to be the best we can be—in Leviticus we hear, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” and in Matthew we hear, “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Wow! and we thought that moving from good to great was a challenge! These words “holy” and “perfect” scare us a bit, don’t they? It’s fine for God to be called holy. Everyone knows that God is holy, and everyone knows we don’t even scratch the surface of God’s holiness and perfection in our own lives! And while people might attempt perfection, I would guess that HOLINESS is not something that most people strive for... after all, isn’t there a negative connotation for being “holier than thou”? Holiness is a special designation reserved for the few who model exceptional faith—like Mother Theresa or the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Holy people live far removed from us and do with their lives things we “common folk” cannot even imagine doing.

But remember how God phrased the message to Moses in our text... “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and tell them: You shall be holy” --everyone in the whole congregation is called to be holy. Being holy is what we are called to be... or, better, to DO!

Holiness is more about actions than it is about character traits. Notice that the description and examples we read about “being holy” in Leviticus had nothing to do with our traditional and often extreme thoughts of personal piety (of fasting, or praying all day long, or reading the Bible from cover to cover)—no, holiness was about how we live with those around us. It’s about how we interact with others in this social world. It’s about living in healthy and loving relationships with all those around us. It’s about not being so focused on SELF that we ignore the needs and rights of the other. It is about seeing, respecting, and treating all people as the Beloved Children of God. Leviticus guides the Israelite people with these laws, “Don’t commit fraud, don’t lie, don’t judge unfairly, don’t slander. Be decent in your financial dealings, don’t forget the poor. Be generous, love your neighbor.” The social focus of this holiness—this justice—is profound: family relations, the poor, fair wages, proper land management, slander, exploitation, neighborly responsibility.

While Leviticus calls for love of neighbor, Jesus reminds us that here in God's kingdom we are called to love those who harm us, oppress us, and even those enemies who are intent on destroying us. Offer those harming us the other cheek. Give those trying to

steal from us, not only our coats, but our clothes as well. Offer to walk an extra mile with someone who compels us to carry a heavy burden for one mile. Give liberally to everyone begging or wanting to borrow from us. Bless and do good, even to those who persecute us. Counter those who would steal ## with a generosity they couldn't expect, and those who harm us with a perfection in love they are sorely lacking.

Both the Hebrew scripture and the Gospel point to the link between holiness and justice. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke about holiness (Christian perfection) as both perfect love and "social holiness." "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social: no holiness but social holiness." Transformational faith means we take the love we have for God and apply it to our everyday living, striving to ensure all people are treated with love, respect, and dignity; making REAL the social justice Jesus preached.

The directive to "be perfect, PERFECT!!!, as your heavenly Parent is perfect" has caused some anxiety as people strive toward perfection—or our worldly understanding of perfection... flawlessness, excellence, and success. However, as Fred Craddock writes, that to be perfect is to love in the way God loves, to practice the way of compassion and giving as God has demonstrated to us through Jesus. Because this perfection has to do with love, which is self-giving rather than self-centered, it is geared toward the other, and has little to do with our worldly concepts of perfection, of flawlessness. Through this understanding, the perfect and holy life might be defined as living full of love for God and for others, which removes us from our nervous self-concern about worldly perfection and places us into the living of healthy relationships within community.

So, what does this look like in practice in our world? The scripture from Leviticus talks about leaving some of the harvest in the field so that the poor can come and gather enough to prevent starvation—this example of holiness is based in an agricultural context... What would it look like for us to "leave some of the harvest in the fields" for the poor?

- maybe it would look like a feeding program like Lunch Break or the Backpack Crew
- maybe it would look like the shelter, food, and resourcing that Family Promise provides for families looking to get back on their feet

I invite you to think of other examples of this care for the poor, which God commands in this Holiness Law

How about what it would look like in our world today not only to love our neighbors, but also our enemies? Could we imagine a world-wide "no-enemy" campaign?—a global movement of people who refuse to view anyone else as an enemy, regardless of religion, race, sexuality, language, economic status, or even their actions. Martin Luther King Jr. made it clear that the essence of non-violent transformation was learning to love those against whom we work. Perhaps the most profound work of justice is this work of unconditional indiscriminate compassion and love. What might our world look like if we worked harder at loving our enemies than we do at killing them?

Can we do it? Can we strive for goodness—for holiness and perfection—imitating and reflecting the love of God? Doing compassion, fairness, non-violence, generosity, love, and justice. Caring for those who are vulnerable and powerless, and treating all people—

neighbor and enemy, rich and poor, Christian and Muslim, American citizen, legal resident, refugee, and undocumented immigrant—with the same respect and dignity.

I pray that we all may hear this challenge that God offers us—to strive toward holiness... to strive toward perfection! Really look at our lives, at the way we relate to others. Do our lives—including our social interactions—model and imitate the justice of Jesus, the love of God??? If not, what are we going to do about it? I pray that we don't just settle for "good enough" ... but that we take this challenge to strive toward holiness and perfection! Amen!