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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, Leviticus 19:

¹And the LORD said to Moses, ²“Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy...” (Leviticus 19:1-2, RSV)

As I preach this sermon, try to bring to mind someone who is quite disagreeable to you. A holy life asks us to bear more with that one than we might be inclined to.

For example, recently Carol and I finished watching a television series about an English detective named George Gently. I like Gently a lot. But I really disliked his sergeant — a young man named John Bacchus. That young man annoyed me every time he came on the scene. But Inspector George Gently bore patiently with his young sergeant. Inspector Gently had a more holy stance toward the young man than I did. And now that the series is done, I find myself a bit ashamed of how hard I was on Sergeant Bacchus. I wish I had been kinder to the young man.

Well, that’s fiction. Try to think of someone in real life who annoys you or even morally offends you. Think of someone who has done you wrong. This is the test ground for what it means to live a holy life. A holy life asks you to stand by that one as a righteous man, woman, boy, or girl—stand right there with him—and not bop him on the head or punch him in the nose, but rather, try to call him on toward righteousness too.

THE HONOR SHOWN TO HUMANITY

In my opinion, our First Lesson is one of the gentlest passages in the Bible and also one of the most complimentary to humanity. This reading from Leviticus 19 is full of compassion and sympathy for the vulnerable. Especially I want to lift up its rule about the harvest — how the landowner must not reap his harvest all the way to the edges of the field, but rather leave them for the poor. But before I turn to that, let me say some more about why I feel this passage to be “complimentary” to humanity.

Can there be higher honor shown to humanity than that we should be called to be holy as God is holy? The Lord instructs Moses to address “all the congregation of the people of Israel.” He is not to show favoritism here. He is not to limit the call to holiness to Israel’s priests or to Israel’s saints. No, this is meant for the

whole people of God—every one of them, high or low, rich or poor, accomplished or humble, educated or unlearned.

God's world, you know, has many wonderful creatures. Many are stronger than we are, swifter, with better eyesight and hearing and so. And yet to none of them does the Lord issue the call that they should be holy as the Lord is holy. The Lord does not address the mighty lion that way. His great mane and his fierce roar seem to intimidate even other creatures. He has a kind of nobility that all the world senses. And yet the Lord does not ask the lion to be holy. The Lord has not constructed the lion in that manner.

Nor has the Lord asked the majestic eagle to be holy, nor the giant Redwood trees of California. Neither yonder stars nor fierce gale on the sea nor kittens nor any other creature is bidden to be holy, for the Lord did not create them in such a way that they can understand the call and obey.

But the Lord *has* constructed humanity in such a way that he can bid us onward to holiness. We are distinguished by this. Of all God's creatures, human beings are the ones who can be bidden to be holy.

And what a call this is! We are called to enter into God's way of life. That is the heart of what it means to be "holy." We are called to conduct ourselves toward one another as God conducts himself toward the world. That way of life is not too high for us. To be holy is not like a horse being asked to write a poem. To be holy is something appropriate for us because God has built us for it. Indeed, we could put the matter this way: We *know* that we are capable of a holy life precisely because our Maker *calls* us to such a holy life:

You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy...

So, this has been my opening praise of our text. I believe that humanity is highly honored in being called to a holy life.

EXAMPLES OF HOLINESS

Now, let's consider some of the concrete forms of holiness of life. Especially I am interested in this matter of the harvest:

⁹“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. ¹⁰And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”

One summer long ago, I worked on a dairy farm. I remember the pride the farmer took in planting his fields in straight rows. He let me try my hand it, and I drove that tractor as straight and true as I could, but I could see him flinch some,

because my rows were not as parallel as he would have made them. Then he has to live with those crooked rows through the summer and on into harvest. He knows that other farmers will notice and perhaps think he's losing his touch a bit.

When a farmer does a thing, he wants to do it right and he wants to do it complete. But these farmers in ancient Israel must not do their work complete. They must leave the edges of their fields unharvested. The edges are to be left for the poor. Same with the vineyard. Provision shall be left for the poor and for the sojourner.

The thing about the edges of the field is that they are so public. Passersby can see whether you have left corn or beans for the poor if you have left them on the edges of the field. If you leave them in the middle, that's good, but it's hard for anyone to know whether you left some of the crop or not.

No, provision is to be left on the edges so that the whole world can see whether the farmer is being obedient to the God who made *both* the rich and the poor. Leaving those edges with produce for the poor is a visual confession of faith that both the rich and the poor are in the hands of God. Furthermore, leaving the edges with food is a public expression of that splendid saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Our God is unwilling that *anyone* should be neglected or forgotten. In this world, the difference between the rich and the world might be a big deal. But in the eyes of God, and in eternity to come, the difference might well be reckoned differently. Indeed, Jesus often spoke of a reversal of things:

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.
(Matthew 19:30, KJV)

And so it is that in the eyes of eternity, the difference between the rich man and the poor man lying at his gate is construed quite differently. Indeed the poor man is now comforted in the arms of Abraham while the rich man dwells in torment and regret. (Luke 16:20ff)

WAGES

Let me lift up another of the examples of holiness from Leviticus 19. This one concerns the timing of wages paid to the worker:

The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. (Leviticus 19:13, RSV)

The Bible knows the value of capital. It knows that if the employee keeps the wages until the morning, the employer can use that money overnight, perhaps to hire an evening or even midnight shift, thereby increasing profit. But meanwhile, the worker is deprived of the money he might have used that evening to buy food for his wife and little ones or medicine they might need.

It is because of this rule in Leviticus that I always try to have an honorarium check waiting in the sacristy for guest preachers. In more than twenty years now, I don't think I've missed on that, at least when I was in charge. I try not to delay on the honorarium, mindful that our God loves the hired worker as much as the employer.

And behind the rule is the holiness of God, who is the God of both the employer and the employee. They both belong to him. The Lord loves them both, cherishes them equally, and wants both to be treated fairly.

Therefore, when the Lord says to his people, Be ye holy, for I the LORD your God am holy, he is bidding us into his way of life. He is bidding us to be godlike in our kindness toward all people.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus extends the point about the rich and the poor both lying in the hands of God. Jesus extends the theme in a remarkable way to include the "the evil and the good":

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on *the evil and on the good*, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Note that this passage reveals that the Lord knows that there are evil people in this world. The Bible does not hide its head in the sand about evil people. There are cruel people — both tyrants who murder millions and cruel people who murder and rape anyone in sight and imagine that they will get away with it.

But the Lord does not deprive evil people of sun and rain and food in due season. He swore that back in the days of Noah—that he would never again destroy the world—and he remains true to his word. The evil do not suddenly suffocate and fall down dead. Their miserable hearts go on beating. Their cruel minds go on working.

So, the Bible is not naïve about whether there are evil people in this world. Nor is it naïve about whether we have enemies. Jesus does not say, "Have no enemies." He rather says, "Love your enemies."

Why? Why should we love our enemies? Because that is what a holy life does. That is how we may be "children of your Father in heaven." We love our enemies because that is what God does.

LOVE

Now we come to the crucial point: What does it mean to "love" our enemies? Judging by this morning's Bible readings, I think we can say that to love our enemies means to draw nearer to them while *at the same time* remaining a true and righteous person who encourages them to be true and righteous persons too.

That is what the Lord has done in our Leviticus reading. He has left the smoke and fire and distance of Mt. Sinai and has come to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. It is from the tabernacle or the “tent of meeting” that the Lord speaks to Moses and on to the people:

¹The LORD called Moses, and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel...” (Leviticus 1:1-2, RSV)

In the laws in our Leviticus reading, the Lord is speaking to people who have *all* disappointed him — both the rich and the poor, the employer and the wage earner, the robber and the one robbed, the blind and the one who puts a stumbling block before the blind, the one whose reputation is hurt and the gossip and destroyer of reputations. He draws near to all of them and calls upon them all to become a holy people.

THE ARC OF LIFE

And so it is that we have the arc of the life of Jesus. He is God drawing near to his people. He walks among them healing the sick, doing good to all, calling them all to repentance and newness of life. He stands among humanity as a righteous person. And he suffers because of it, all the way to death on a cross. He never condones evil, yet he never withdraws from the evildoer. He never says that sin is not sin, yet he never gives up on the sinner. That is his holy way of life. And that is the holiness to which you and I are called, even as St. Peter wrote long ago:

...but as he who called you is holy, *be holy* yourselves in all your conduct; (1 Peter 1:15, RSV)

Indeed we are *all* called to holiness of life, each of us here in the pews of Immanuel Lutheran Church. We constitute a holy fellowship in this world, for the good of this world. We make up a “holy nation” as the apostle puts it:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9, RSV)

“... of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light,” even Jesus Christ our Lord, the holy One, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.