

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**“Being Holy”**

**February 20, 2011**

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***Leviticus 19: 1-2***

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:*

*Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*

***Leviticus 19: 9-18***

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your 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 the alien: I am the LORD your God.*

*You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.*

*You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.*

*You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.*

*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

In his book *The Sower's Seeds*, Brian Cavanaugh shares this story. Once upon a time, seventeen hundred years ago, a young man decided to be a saint. He left his family and his home, he sold all that he owned and gave the money to the poor, and walked off into the desert to find God. He continued walking until he found a dark cave. “Here,” he thought, “I will be alone with God. Nothing can distract me here from the presence of God.” He entered the cave and prayed all day and all night. But God sent him great temptations. He imagined all the good things of life-his family and friends, a good meal, and a beautiful and warm coat. The young man wanted them desperately. But he was determined to give up everything in order to have only God alone. After months of praying, the temptations stopped. He was at peace, with nothing but God. The young man became known as St. Anthony of Egypt.

But then, according to legend, God said, “Leave your cave for a few days and go off to a distant town. Look for the town shoemaker. Knock on the door and stay with him for a while.”

The saint was puzzled by God's command, but he left the next morning. He walked all day across the desert sands. By nightfall he came to the village, found the home of the shoemaker, and knocked on the door. A smiling man opened it.

"Are you the shoemaker?" the saint asked. "Yes, I am," the shoemaker replied. He noticed how tired and hungry St. Anthony looked. "Come in," he said. "You need something to eat and a place to rest." The shoemaker called his wife and they prepared a fine meal for the saint and gave him a good bed on which to sleep. The saint stayed with the shoemaker and his family for three days. He asked them many questions about their lives but he did not tell them much about himself, even though the couple was very curious. They talked a lot and became good friends.

Then the saint said goodbye to the shoemaker and his wife. He walked back across the desert to his cave, wondering why God had sent him to visit the shoemaker. "What was the shoemaker like?" God asked St. Anthony when he had settled down again inside the dark cave. "He is a simple man," the saint began. "He has a wife who is going to have a baby. They seem to love each other very much. He has a small shop where he makes shoes. He works very hard. They have a simple house. They give money and food to those who have less than they have. He and his wife believe very strongly in you and pray at least once a day. They have many friends and they enjoy laughter and fellowship with them."

God listened very carefully. "You are a great saint, Anthony," God said. "You are very holy in my holy presence. And the shoemaker and his wife are great saints too. They are holy in all they do in their lives."

You are about to witness history today. I have preached now for almost 26 years. I estimate that I have delivered nearly 1300 sermons. Until today, I have never preached a sermon from the book of Leviticus. I would imagine that most of my colleagues in ministry steer clear of Leviticus. When people tell me that they are going to read the Bible from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation, I tell them they will probably want to rethink their plan when they get to Leviticus. It is a book full of the laws of God as delivered to the hands of Moses. The book is made up of all of the religious and social rules and regulations that were given to bring the people of Israel from their time of exile into their time of building a community in the Promised Land. But the words of Leviticus are about as dull and uninspiring as the Congressional record or the installation manual for an automatic garage door opener! It is easily dismissed as the prime example of horrible "Old Testament legalism."

But it seems I have found an exception to my thinking in these words from the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Holy. The dictionary defines holy as "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness." Another definition, which I prefer, defines holy as "set apart for sacred purpose." A holy person then, it would seem, is one who is complete in righteousness, perfect in thinking and in action. Most of us can probably safely agree that this is something, even on our best days, we can never obtain. Being truly holy is beyond the realm of our ability as human beings. Yet the words of God in Leviticus remind us that we "shall" be holy, for God is already holy. We "shall" be holy. We aspire to be holy. We are to become holy. And if we know what God is and what God does, we will be in a better position to know what it is that we are to become.

It is interesting to me to hear holy behavior describes in the following verses of the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. Leave some of your harvest behind for the poor and strangers to the community. Don't steal from others and don't accuse them falsely. Don't defraud your neighbor or keep from them wages that they deserve. Don't mistreat those with physical limitations. Don't be arbitrary in your judgments about others. Do not slander or speak ill about others. Do not hate in your heart, nor bear grudges. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

This is the wonderful point to this lesson from God. How is the community of faith, bound to God and to one another in the love of God, supposed to reflect the redemptive

relationship they have with the God of Grace? If we believe that God lives in our midst, if we believe that God is furnishing an intention that we are to pursue as a community and as individuals within that community; then we must live as if God makes a difference in each moment. And we must live as if God makes a difference in everything! Although it may seem to be true, being holy does not require a dramatic change in behavior. Rather being holy requires a certain mindfulness that needs to be part of each and every moment. Being holy is more within the reach of the loving shoemaker than it is the saint who retreats to the cave.

I recall my daughter Maren discussing what she has learned from living in an apartment complex at college the past two years. It didn't seem so grand to me because I already knew it but for Maren it was something new to process and consider. You can learn a lot of life in such a setting. I guess it is part of the education that college tuition doesn't cover. You learn that most people in your apartment complex are different than you. You don't want your noise to disturb others so you keep your music and television volumes turned respectfully down. If you live on the upper floors, you don't practice your tap dancing assignment in your apartment. You don't carry on a conversation with a friend in the hallway, right outside the door of a neighbor. You don't leave your clothes unattended in the laundry room. You don't park in your neighbor's space or in a manner that takes up two spaces. And none of this takes in the cleaning and cooking and grocery and noise issues that you must consider if you have a roommate who isn't exactly like you. If you do these things, if you show such consideration, the community prospers and more benefit from the blessings of the setting.

And so it is for us as the people of God. We shall be holy in the same way that God is holy. If we believe that God is with us, that God lives and moves in the midst of our very life, then we treat others in the same way we believe God sees them and cares for them. If we believe that God is with us, that God lives and moves in the midst of our very life, then we are kind to our neighbors, we are mindful of the needs of the poor, we are slow to anger and insult, and we allow even those who appear to injure us an extra ounce of mercy.

Scott Hoezee writes that "in a society which spends 99% of its energy judging people based on their looks, income, or performances, we need to have a different focus. We need to tell our children and one another that what matters most is that we are good people for God. No, we are not trying to be good to earn our way into heaven. We try to be good because our place in heaven was long ago secured by grace alone." We are good because God is good and we are that presence of God that others encounter. He writes that although being followers of God "means more than just being good and gentle and kind, it does not mean being less. These are things we ought to celebrate in one another and encourage in each other."

"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." You shall love your neighbor as yourself.