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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“What Does It Mean to Be Holy?”

Text: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Dear people of God, what words come to mind when I say that such and such person is holy? Godly? Saintly? Virtuous? Righteous? The second verse of our Sermon Lesson this morning from Leviticus states, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). And so, each of us is called to be holy. Did the words that came to your mind to describe a holy person describe you?

Well, not to let you off the hook, but the biblical meaning of holiness is “to be other” or “to be set apart.” That’s still a challenge, isn’t it? What does it mean for us today as followers of God and Jesus Christ “to be set apart?”

When the ancient Israelites receive this message through Moses, they are wandering in the wilderness. They are in the “in-between” time of being no longer slaves in Egypt and not yet established in Canaan. During this interim time, they are constantly being reminded by their leaders that they must live up to their identity as God’s people. They

must not live and act like their pagan neighbors. They must live according to a different standard. They are to be holy, in the way that God, the LORD, Yahweh, is holy.

The priestly tradition of ancient Israel, which wrote the Book of Leviticus, had some very specific ideas about how to live in this holy way. Our Sermon Lesson this morning includes commandments such as leaving some of the harvest in the fields for the poor, being honest, acting with respect for the disabled, and promoting justice. A lot of these directives make sense, even today, don't they? We can agree with a lot of them. Maybe Leviticus is not such a scary book after all.

But the very next verse after the Sermon lesson, verse 19 of chapter 19, 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." So if you would all just lean forward and check the clothing label of the person seated in front of you, well, never mind. Those instructions don't seem to make much sense.

The entire book pretty much goes like this, a hodgepodge of rules. Some we can certainly agree with, such as "Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute" (Leviticus 19:29). But some seem not to apply to our society today, such as "You shall not round off the hair on your

temples or mar the edges of your beard” (Leviticus 19:27). Many verses in Leviticus, thankfully, are no longer relevant today because they deal with slavery and sacrificial worship practices. And then there are rules that spark heated debate, such as Leviticus 18:22, “You shall not lie with a male as one does with a woman; it is an abomination.” This was once lectured to me by a spirited former parishioner. I noticed that he had a large tattoo on his arm. And so, he didn’t like it when I quoted to him Leviticus 19:28, “You shall not . . . tattoo any marks upon you.” Why is it that Christians are so keen on quoting the commandment from Leviticus against homosexual relations and not the commandment from Leviticus against engraving tattoos?

Admittedly it’s not always easy to determine which rules in Leviticus still apply today and which ones are obsolete or irrelevant. And it’s a little disingenuous to go through the Book of Leviticus and make our own list of the rules we like and ignore the ones we don’t like. What we need to have when we read Leviticus, as with any other book of the Bible, is a redemptive focus. Specifically in the Book of Leviticus, we recognize that the broader message for God’s people at that time is that they need to live by rules that set them apart from the broader pagan culture. They are to live as God’s holy people in the world.

We are God's holy people today. And so, we too need some clear rules to guide us through our own wilderness.

As much as I might have difficulty with my fundamentalist Christian brothers and sisters, I also recognize that my liberal Christian brothers and sisters may not place enough value on commandments, on rules that should govern our lives. We are often afraid of coming across as legalistic, judgmental, or close-minded if we talk about God's law. By doing so, we ignore the truth that rules can serve a valuable function. If you think about it, you know that having a set of rules in mind to which you are committed helps you to make decisions about how to act before difficult situations arise, and you might be caught up in an emotional crisis and not be in a position to make a snap judgment at the time.

It's too bad that there are no young people in church today. Since this is school vacation week, the Christian Education Committee gave the Sunday School children and the confirmands the Sunday off, and the Youth Group is with Miss Linda this morning for their monthly breakfast meeting at Eller's Restaurant. Well, maybe it's good that they're not here because of an example that I would like to bring up to show that it's important to be committed to certain rules or standards ahead of time before a situation arises. The situation is "making out." We all remember

those days, don't we? It's important to set our own physical boundaries. What's the proper level of physical intimacy at each point in a relationship? And at what age? When you're making out in the back seat of a car is not the time to decide if you're ready to have sex with another person. Such rules, guidelines, and boundaries must be determined beforehand when you're thinking clearly.

Of course, rules aren't all about what we can't do. There are also rules about what we should do. And if we're honest with ourselves, we know that some of the things we should do take time and energy that we often don't want to give.

Why don't we begin in small steps? Can we commit to attending worship services for each of the six Sundays of Lent? I notice that only about 12 persons have signed up for our Lenten Series. Can we commit that we will attend at least 3 of the 6 installments of the Lenten Series? Is that too much to ask? Is it too much to ask to be willing to be a greeter and usher one month out of the year? Our Bible Study can certainly use more participants as well as our Movie Matinee. I know it's difficult for some of you to attend an evening event, but can you try to make the effort to come to our Ash Wednesday Service on March 5 or our Maundy Thursday Service on April 17? We can use a couple of more scripture

readers on Sunday morning in the coming weeks because two of our confirmands have dropped out, each of whom was supposed to read twice. I know that we're a small congregation, and so, there's not much of a turnover on our boards and committees from year to year, but we're going to need someone who will take over the Greeters list in the coming year. If you'd like to do that, see Judy Devoe or any member of the diaconate. They'll be meeting next Sunday and will need to notify the Nominating Committee shortly as to who that person or couple should be.

We do a lot for a small congregation. I'm continually impressed with what our choir, Sunday School, and Youth Group accomplish, but we can always do more. As Congregationalists, we often don't like to have rules that are written down. That smacks too much of legalism. Unlike most denominations, we don't even have any official creeds or confessions of faith to which members must subscribe. That doesn't mean that we don't have any theological beliefs that we think are important. In the same way, we don't have membership requirements, such as you must give a minimum amount of money to the church during the course of a year or you must serve on a board or committee every three years. Nevertheless we have unwritten rules. I know that several of you send "Get Well" cards to those who have been sick or hospitalized or Christmas cards to

those who are in nursing homes or are shut-ins. I know that several of you donate food to the Carty Cupboard food pantry each month. I know that several of you make anonymous donations to our Sunday School and Youth Group.

You don't do these things because you are required. You do them because you want to do them. These unwritten rules of the church go a long way in assuring that you are caring for one another as a congregation. Most of us, I suspect, would resist committing these rules to writing. Most of us would not want to require prospective members of the church to commit to these practices when they join. Most of us would be loathe to require them of present members. When I hold membership classes for those interested in joining the church, I tell them the spiritual benefits of regular Sunday worship, participating in some form of Christian education, and monetarily supporting the church, but I don't say that these are all obligatory.

There are examples of churches that make such requirements upon prospective members. Rick Warren's famous church, the Saddleback Church, located in Orange County, California, a Southern Baptist congregation, makes clear that prospective members must fulfill certain obligations in order to join. And the obligations are many. In fact the

membership classes alone take up six months of Sundays. Saddleback Church has been very successful in drawing new members, despite these requirements. Each weekend, an average of 22,000 people come to at least one Saddleback worship service. This has been accomplished while Saddleback has raised, not lowered, the bar for church membership.

A lot of congregations are afraid that they will scare people away if they ask too much from them. They want to make church membership as easy as possible. They don't want to ask for a lot of people's time or money. They just want a name on a membership roll. These churches are rarely successful in attracting new members. Saddleback, which requires plenty from prospective members, is very successful in attracting them. Though I think they go too far in their requirements, especially their theological requirements as a fundamentalist Protestant church, they realize that people are not willing to commit to something that doesn't ask much from them. People want to commit to something they think is worthwhile. They're willing to make the time and effort for something they really believe in. Saddleback Church understands this truth.

If we were to make our membership requirements more stringent, would our church grow in numbers? I don't know. As much as I might disagree with Rick Warren theologically, I agree with him that dumbing

down church membership expectations is not the answer. We should have heightened expectations for our members, not lowered ones. No one should view the Christian life as doing the least possible in order to just make it into heaven. Remember the passage from 1 Corinthians that Bruce read earlier. The apostle Paul talks about the Christian's works that are burned up by fire resulting in his or her suffering loss. That's the Christian who doesn't take his commitment seriously. He just goes through the motions and is just barely saved, having little or nothing to show for it. If that's the kind of life you want, fine. You're still welcome here. But I would hope that you would want to improve your spiritual life. I would hope that you would want to become the best Christian you can be. We get only one chance in life. That's goes for everything, including the church. Don't we want to make the most of it?

An important part of our holiness is our commitment to serve God's church. How can we improve on doing that? If you have suggestions, please come and tell me. Or tell the deacons. We need to share our ideas as a congregation set apart by God for holy purposes. Making a stronger commitment to the church doesn't mean that we'll make more written requirements of our members. There are plenty of religious groups that seek to dictate how their adherents live, where they can go, what they

can do, who they can talk to and who they can't, even who they can marry. These groups are called cults, and the rules enforced by cult leaders are not designed to bring about a person's spiritual growth. They're designed to enhance the ego and power of the cult leadership. One of my colleagues in the ministry, Jeff Conlon, was a Moonie, a member of the Unification Church, for many years. His marriage was arranged. By God's grace, Jeff and his wife have been happily married for almost 30 years. By God's grace also, Jeff saw the error of belonging to such a cult, left the Unification Church, and eventually became an ordained minister in the UCC. He now serves as the pastor of Faith United Parish in Fitchburg.

Being holy doesn't necessarily mean that we follow specific legal commandments written 2000 and 3000 years ago. When we find the redemptive message in any passage of the Bible, we are acknowledging the general principle or directive intended to bring about peace, justice, community, stewardship, or love. The more specific laws and rules written in Leviticus were intended to show how a particular people--the ancient Israelites in about 1250 BC, recently removed from pagan Egypt, becoming reacquainted with their ancestral religion from which they were denied by centuries of slavery--could live holy lives at that time and

in their unique circumstances.

How we can attain holiness today in our specific circumstances is going to be different. The Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality and tattoos are no longer relevant. Being faithful to Jesus Christ today may require something different from what the ancient Israelites were called to do. We must remember what Jesus said in Bruce's other reading this morning: "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you" (Matthew 5:38-39). Amen.