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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE WHAT?

Collin and I have been married for almost three years. Next month we will celebrate that third anniversary, which moves us officially out of the newlywed category. This means that we have quite a few stories that will probably be much funnier to us a couple of years down the road. For the record, I did ask and receive permission to tell this particular story.

For an entire year of our almost three-year marriage, a handwritten note was taped to the refrigerator. It was titled: How to Clean the Kitchen. Under the title was an order of operations, a sort of step-by-step explanation in case the person in charge of cleaning the kitchen was unsure of the expected level of cleanliness. It went something like this: One - if there are clean dishes in the dishwasher, unload them. Two – if there are dirty dishes in the sink, put them in the dishwasher. Three – using something other than a dry towel, wipe off the counter top.... and so on and so forth.

Some of you might be thinking that these are obvious actions one must take to clean a kitchen. You would be wrong. Prior to the written instructions being posted on the refrigerator, there had been massive confusion as to what constitutes clean. There had been accusations that there were no criteria, so how was one to know what to do? The kitchen memo was intended to clear things up a bit, to be a guide for the person lost to cleanliness standards.

What I wish I could do is tie this “little darling” of a story to the text from Leviticus. The parallels are fairly apparent. Both memo and text have titles, letting the reader in on the purpose of the writing. Like the kitchen list, the Leviticus text is directive. When we look at Leviticus 19, actually read the text, it is obvious that it is a list of instructions. It is just as obvious when it is read aloud to us. Do these things to achieve this result.

The problem with my desire to draw parallels between the kitchen memo and the Leviticus text is that there is more to it than that. The text is backed by an authority that the kitchen memo somehow lacked.

The lectionary text seems somewhat cobbled together. We read the first two verses and then skip to verse nine and finish with verse eighteen. It is the very “cobbled together” construction of the text selection that highlights the gravity of the passage. The first two verses read, “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.” There it is. Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

That word . . . HOLY. It makes us uncomfortable. Holy is supposed to stay safely tucked into hymn lyrics or reserved for extra-special designation of divine experience. That word seems just out of reach, “be holy” feels unattainable, an exercise in futility, a standard set too high. “Be holy, for God is holy” smacks of a motivational trick, like the line “Shoot for moon, even if you miss you’ll land among the stars.” Try to be holy because even if you aren’t, at least you’ll be a really good person.

More than that, the word conjures up negative associations: self-righteousness, being holier-than-thou, the steady beat of Bible-thumping. Yikes. No one wants that. We certainly don’t want to be accused of using scripture as a weapon or of measuring spirituality by perfect church attendance. That kind of holiness lurks in the undertones of lovely phrases like “conservative, Christian values,” and leaves a bad taste in the mouth, unless of course you are one of those people with conservative Christian values. And it is only right to point out that the progressive church has its own variety of bad-taste-in-the-mouth holiness that divides and excludes, too. We are quick to say that our brand of Christianity makes “head and heart equal partners in faith,” but the truth is that we often turn our noses up at the heart part, thinking we are too smart to spend time listening for a still, small voice. Either way, those attitudes poison our concept of holiness.

And so we shy away from that word, holy, either because it seems an absurd notion for an existence in a world so complicated as ours or because we have had too many bad experiences with people who claim that word really does describe who they are and what they do.

Even the author of this passage is uncomfortable repeating the word holy. In the span of nine verses, the author repeats the phrase “I am the Lord your God,” or “I am the Lord,” referencing the longer phrase that begins the chapter, “be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” It is as if he wants to remind us, without assaulting us, that the way of life described in Leviticus is honest-to-God human holiness. So instead, he just writes part of the phrase, a gentler reminder that we are connected with the eternal presence. “I am your God,” “you and I are in a relationship, so here is how I expect you to act.”

Rudolf Otto says in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, that “human nature has a religious aspect that responds to the mysterious and the awesome, a reality that can be embraced only in the word *holy*.” The call is to go beyond just being nice to people. Holy connotes something deeper. The text gives us a glimpse of the public struggle of a people who were trying to figure out what a relationship with God meant, how the connection with the Holy would play out in

their communities. Does that sound familiar? As the people of God asked so long ago, we still ask, “How are we supposed to be holy?”

The answer, in Leviticus, is to imitate the holiness of God. And the text doesn’t just list vague notions about peace and love and how to feel warm and fuzzy, but actual examples of how to *embody holiness*; how to embody God. The instructions are to roll up our sleeves and get dirty, *get holy*.

Verses nine and ten talk about our relationship with the poor in our community, and not just the ones who are documented. “Leave the gleanings of your harvest for the poor **and the alien**,” which is another way of saying “be mindful that everyone has enough.” Holy is being intentional about providing for others.

Verses eleven, twelve and thirteen speak to integrity. Tell the truth. Don’t use the name of God to lull your neighbor into a false sense of security. Wages should be paid promptly. The holiness of God is embodied in relationships that are characterized by honesty.

The text continues by reminding us that we are to care for people who are blind and deaf. The text was written at a time when mental illness was not understood, but had it been, the author would have included it here. Wholeness does not come from having all working body parts, but through a community that embraces all people, whether it be through ramps for wheelchairs or adequate funding for mental health facilities. That is holiness.

Verses fifteen and sixteen describe being holy as being just, treating everyone fairly. “Do not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.” Seeing the person, not their bank account or lack thereof.

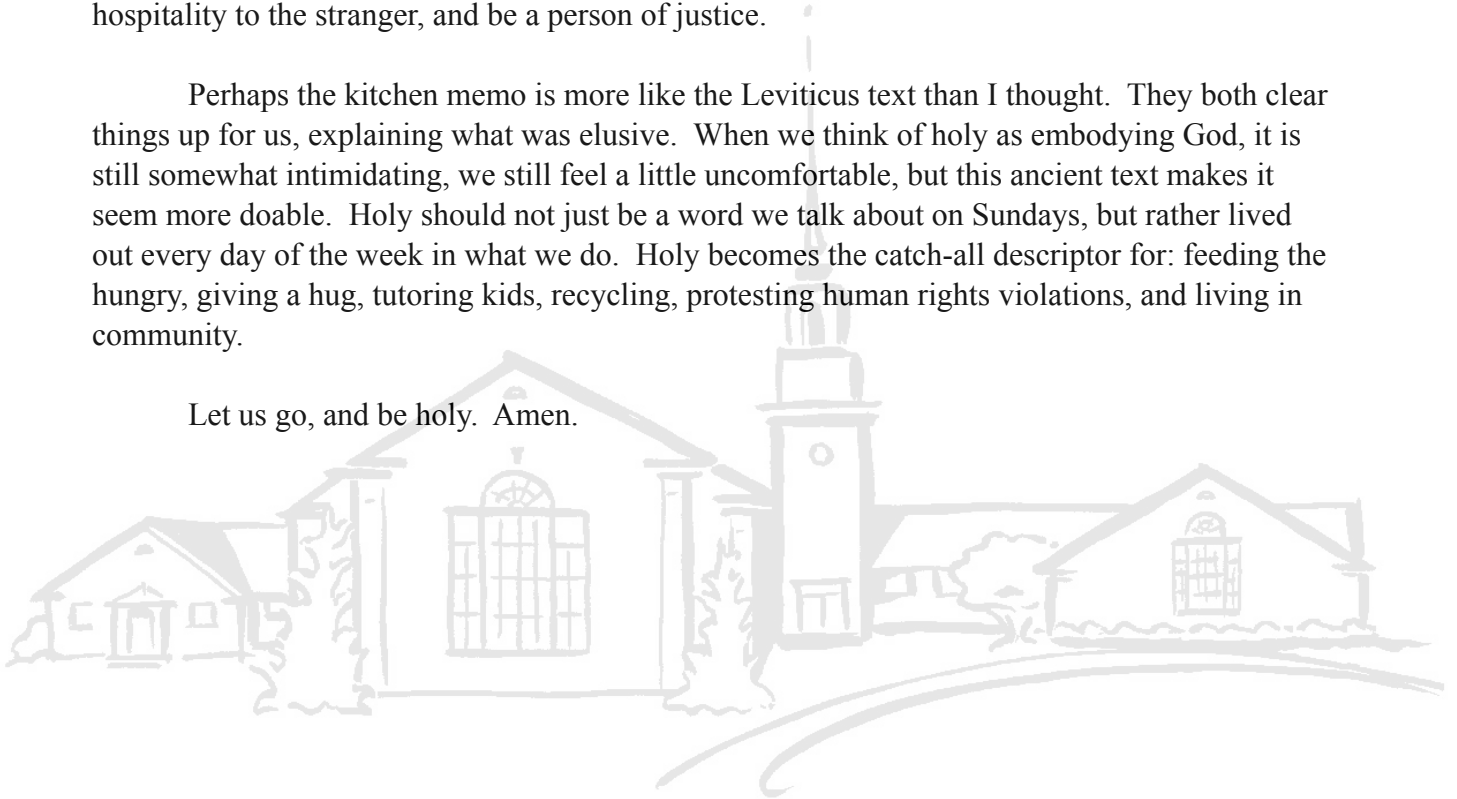
“Do not profit by the blood of your neighbor” or in more modern terms, “Don’t stand by when your neighbor is in danger.” Like, when we see people picketing Planned Parenthood, pushing the government to end federal funding, be holy. Routine gynecological care, birth control and pre-natal care are unaffordable for many women. Planned Parenthood is the primary medical care for these women. Failure to stop another person’s damaging activity is to accept that activity, and, in effect, approve it. Speaking out for those who cannot be heard over hot-button issue rhetoric; that is holiness.

And in verse eighteen, we find what Jesus named as the second greatest commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But this is not the kind of love that leads you to friend someone on facebook or “like” their status updates. That holy thing intensifies the word love, just like everything else. To love your neighbor is to reach out, to take up the mantle of another. To share each other’s burdens. It is to see the children at Taft Middle School and say they are our kids, too. It is to know that there are hungry elderly folk and respond by volunteering with Mobile Meals. Being holy is loving enough to do something.

To be holy is to roll up one's sleeves and to join in with whatever God is doing in the world. That is why, in this chapter about holiness, the emphasis is on social justice. Produce should be left in the fields for the poor to glean. Care for neighbors, as well as the strangers in our midst. Holiness is actualized in and by the life of the community; love your neighbor, show hospitality to the stranger, and be a person of justice.

Perhaps the kitchen memo is more like the Leviticus text than I thought. They both clear things up for us, explaining what was elusive. When we think of holy as embodying God, it is still somewhat intimidating, we still feel a little uncomfortable, but this ancient text makes it seem more doable. Holy should not just be a word we talk about on Sundays, but rather lived out every day of the week in what we do. Holy becomes the catch-all descriptor for: feeding the hungry, giving a hug, tutoring kids, recycling, protesting human rights violations, and living in community.

Let us go, and be holy. Amen.



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