**Sermon Text – Sunday, October 25, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**1st Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; 2nd Reading: Matthew 22:34-46**
**Scripture for the Message: Leviticus 19:1&2, 15-18H "Holiness"**

Leviticus 19 – there are some things in the Old Testament that are hard for us in "modern times" to understand. We must realize that the various laws in this section are both archaic and arcane or mysterious. Some of the commands from God that we read here make perfect sense while some of these commands are confusing – we don't know the reasoning behind them. Two things to remember however – first there is no such thing as a command pertaining merely to relations between human beings; every action whether God commands or prohibits it affects the sacred realm and is in the category of laws between God and human beings, then keep in mind that when these commands are followed by "I Am the Lord" it is equivalent to "Because I Say So." When Moses brought these commandments to the people and they became Levitical law it is because God said so.

Our scripture reading begins with God telling Moses to speak to the congregation saying, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The rest of what was read are actions that when followed ensure holiness. If you look closely at these commands, it is apparent that these are instructions for how to live in community. The people have been wandering in wilderness, both literal and figurative wilderness, they were slaves and are now on their own. They needed to learn not only how to live as free citizens, but also how to live together and how to create communities in the lands where God was leading them.

Basically, the rules our reading covered today have to do with fairness, justice, and grudges. The Lord commands the people to render equal justice under the law – do not show partiality to either the poor or the great. Not only in official judicial proceedings, but also where it is their place to judge, do not judge unfairly. The Lord commands that the people do not go around spreading gossip and telling stories about others and they are not to ignore the shedding of blood. I'm thinking that was as important then as it is now – when you see something, say something. Do not bear false witness but that does not mean to turn your back when you do witness an offense. Do not withhold justice from the perpetrators of evil because that also shows partiality.

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The Lord gives commands regarding our family, do not hate in your heart anyone of your kin, the meaning of that is clear. The Lord adds to that, you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. What does it mean to "reprove" our neighbor and why is that added? I wonder if this is a warning to honestly point out a fault or wrongdoing rather than letting it build bitterness and resentment inside of you – do not hate in your heart. It could also mean that when you see evil and corruption – do something about it don't watch it grow into something beyond control. Point out indiscretions and do what you can to return your neighbor to the path of righteousness. The next commands about taking vengeance or bearing a grudge expand on that idea. What we read here are commands that refer to pent-up hatred or resentment and the consequences of that. It is interesting that all of this is followed by – "I am the Lord" or "Because I say so."

The story in Matthew 22, where the Pharisees question Jesus to test him – "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" and we hear Jesus respond with, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God – Love your neighbor – and love yourself. All of the commands of God, the ones we read in the book of Leviticus, are covered by these two commandments and boil down in my mind to one thing – LOVE.

Holiness equates to Love on a basic level. Holy is not a solitary act – we become holy within a community. One writer puts it this way, "To be holy is a communal act based on our interaction with others, not only on individual behavior."[1] We are made holy because God is holy, and we belong to God. Our holiness doesn't make us better than other people. It connects us to other people. Because they also belong to God, and God is holy, so they are holy.

In our "Eurocentric hyper-individualistic" world, the call to "be holy" has been given a different meaning from how the Hebrew word would have been originally translated. We consider someone holy who does not drink, swear, or tell lies – someone who attends regular worship, implying

[1] Miguel De La Torre. "Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18: Connecting the Reading with Scripture" *Connections: Year A, Vol. 3.* eds. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, & Sharp. WJK. 2020. Print. pp.408-409

that "holiness" is an individual practice. The Leviticus passage on "being holy" in its original intent would be more about a community belonging to God and separate or set apart because the Lord our God is separate from other gods. [To be sure the people at that time did believe there were "other" gods.] "To be set apart produces fruit, but to follow the norms of the world, leads to a withered existence, to be tossed aside."[2] This recalls a line from Psalm 1 – "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

There is a lot from the book of Leviticus that we just cannot pull into our twenty-first century practices. We can however listen to the underlying message of God's commands. Everything here reminds us that the Lord commands what is loving and what enables us to live together in a community that is complete with people who are different in many ways. "I am the Lord" and this is how you are to live in spite of diversity. These words and laws are what set the people of Israel apart and what made them holy – following the commands to seek justice and to love others is what makes us holy as well.

God knows that holding on to grudges, or judging others unfairly will lead to pent-up resentment and even to hatred in some cases. All of that comes with consequences for the community as a whole in addition to the consequences to individuals. We see that in the world we live in, when even one person or a group of people hold on to resentment and seek revenge it has ripple effects. When we treat people unfairly or preference is given to one group over another – the consequences can be far reaching. And, when we ignore bloodshed, mistreatment of others, and injustice the guilt gets picked up by everyone who turns their back – because of these words, "I am the Lord" and I say so.

So, the question I want this church to consider is – how does a community of faith need to change in order to be known as a community of holy love for the neighborhood? I don't have all the answers – I think the love that flows from these doors we intend for the community, but I wonder how much of the community knows our intent. Again, holiness is not an individual action – to be a holy people is a communal practice

[2] IBID

geared toward others, separating us from others. We cannot be "holy" on desert islands no matter how our current culture tries to convince us otherwise.

The practical way to "be holy" as God is holy is to take our love of neighbor seriously. Not just the neighbor who is close to us in proximity – our neighbor is the world. Our neighbor who deserves love includes those who are difficult to love, those who are different from us in appearance and in cultural practices. We do struggle to be holy and loving, we struggle because it is what defines our very humanity. We do these things not because we expect a reward, we do these things in response to God's love and because of these words - "I Am the Lord" and I say so.

We are just two weeks away from the time of midterm elections – I encourage all of you to VOTE. I can only speak for myself, but I notice every year that our political climate gets "angrier" and "angrier." Those on the "other" side are made to look like demonic creatures or they try to pass themselves off as being without flaw or fault. Here's my final thought on holiness – "Rather than following the culture by demonizing and disenfranchising the political "other," Christ's followers must elevate all sides to the status of neighbor."[3] In more common terms, love your neighbor, don't be telling stories about others, don't judge unfairly where it is your place to judge, don't distort judgment, don't take vengeance or bear a grudge. This is, in my opinion, how a community of faith becomes known as a community of holy love.

[3] Brian D. Russell. "Leviticus 19:1-2, Connecting the Reading with the World" *Connections: Year A, Vol. 3.* eds. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, & Sharp. WJK. 2020. Print. pp.409-411