



AN INVITATION TO HOLINESS

February 19, 2017, The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

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The buzz was earth-shatteringly loud. At least that was how it sounded to me. It was 1991 and I was serving as a student minister at a tiny church in inner city Trenton. The dwindling congregation was predominantly elderly and middle class. The neighborhood surrounding the church had declined significantly over the years. One of my responsibilities there was to help run the weekly food pantry. It was no New York Common Pantry affair. Two women in their seventies and I would meet on a Saturday morning and fill between 35 and 40 bags with donated food. People would gather in a line outside the church and it was just first-come, first-served until the bags ran out, and they always did.

After handing out bags for a number of Saturdays, we decided to switch the distribution day to Sunday so more church members could be involved. The plan was to start distributing food at 12:30 following worship. As usual, people lined up early to make sure they would get a bag of food. What none of us had considered was that the door by which they waited had a doorbell. And that doorbell buzzed throughout the building, the entire building, including in the sanctuary. So there we sat in the sanctuary during worship. The pastor was in the midst of the prayers of the people. Heads were bowed. Sacred words were being spoken in the midst of hushed silence.

And then it came. Buzzzz. My heart sank. I felt the room tense for a moment. There was a brief pause in the prayer but then the praying continued. Buzzzz, there it was again echoing through the sanctuary. I wondered if I could crawl under my pew so no one would know that I was there. We soldiered on throughout



the rest of the service interspersed with buzzing. At the conclusion of worship I made a hasty retreat to hand out bags of food. I was afraid to look back and see how frustrated the faces of the congregation may have been. We will return to this embarrassing story of mine later in the sermon.

“I know it when I see it.” These words were written in 1964 by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart. In the case *Jacobellis vs. Ohio* the court was asked to rule whether a film was obscene or not. He wrote the following, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [‘hard-core pornography’], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.” Stewart was praised for his candor and his common sense in this ruling.¹

No, today’s sermon is not about obscenity. As the sermon title would suggest, today I am speaking about holiness, but I do want us to keep in mind Stewart’s famous line, “I know it when I see it.” And I ask us to keep this line in mind because defining holiness in this world is no simple task. In fact, I would venture to say that the more words we throw at trying to nail it down the further away we get from it. And that could be a bit of a problem for us. In our text from Leviticus this morning, we are given a variety of instructions but the very expectation is “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” I guess we better figure out what holy is if we are being called to it. And if words alone will not do it, I believe we must look past definitions into how we see it present in the world.

But first, the words. When we do try to define holiness or the holy, and turn to the Oxford English Dictionary, this is how they define it: “kept or regarded as sacred; set apart for religious use or observance.” It strikes me that the OED definition is surprisingly small. It suggests that the holy is removed from the world and only to be found in specific places. I do not think this could be further from the truth.

The holy is to be found wherever and whenever God is present. If God is only present in religious places and times set apart from the rest of the world, heaven



help us all. When I think about where the holy can be found, I am reminded of two stories from the gospel of Mark, stories that bookend Jesus' entire ministry. The first is when Jesus is baptized. We are told the heavens are torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. The second is when Jesus is crucified. When Jesus breathes his last the curtain of the temple is torn in two. In both of these stories we are given stark imagery of the breaking of boundaries between what is traditionally considered holy, in this case heaven and the inner sanctum of the temple, and what is considered the ordinary world, by the Jordan river and the streets of Jerusalem.

Between these two accounts, symbolizing the invasion of the holy throughout creation, we receive the story of Jesus' ministry. He teaches. He heals. He feeds. In essence, Jesus offers truth, and mercy, and compassion, and generosity wherever he goes, often in the most unlikely of places to the most unlikely of people.

In returning to our reading from Leviticus, after the call to holiness we are given a variety of instructions. We are told to always make sure the poor and the alien are provided for by purposely leaving some harvest of grain and grapes. We are told to not steal, to not engage in falsehood, to not take vengeance or bear a grudge, and finally, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

God, speaking through Moses, knows that defining the holy in mortal and limiting language is not very helpful. Instead a picture is painted for us, a picture of honesty and generosity and mercy. So how do we reconcile an OED definition of "holy" as set apart with this exposition on the holy in Leviticus? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was the chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth for over a decade, writes this about the holy in the book of Leviticus, "It begins in the sanctuary but ends in society."² If we are to be the holy people God is calling us to be, perhaps we are being called to be "set apart." But not set apart in isolation; set apart for a purpose.

I cannot adequately define what is holy for you but I know it when I see it. And I see it when our people spend a Saturday in the Rockaways rebuilding a Hurricane Sandy storm-damaged home for a family. I see it when homeless men and women



are gathered around a table and served food at Jan Hus, or the NCS residence on 81st street, or in Watson Hall. I see it when there is dancing and singing and food for all at a Block Party sponsored by Church of the Living Hope on 104th Street in East Harlem.

I can also tell you what the call to holiness sounds like. It is that doorbell creating a cacophony in the midst of worship at that tiny church in Trenton. It is the cries of the chronically unemployed. It is the anxious comments of the Mexican residents on 104th Street as they fear harassment. It is society in need banging on the door of the sanctuary. The question is whether we can be conduits of the holiness; that is being called to respond and travel from this sanctuary back out into society.

When Jesus was baptized and the heavens were torn in two, he ushered in a wave of generosity and mercy and provision for the most vulnerable. Our world, our nation, our city do not reflect nearly enough of the in-breaking of the holy in our midst. We are not sufficiently caring for the poor and the alien. We are not standing in truth. We are not living without vengeance and grudges. This is a reality beyond personal worldviews, beyond political ideology and preference.

We are called to be holy, and that calling is urgent. We have been given a vision for what that looks like. “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. 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... You shall not defraud your neighbor... 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 take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

In these days when there is so much angst and unease the urge to block out the wider world is palpable. But we have received a call from our God to be holy and we can hear our broken world knocking on our door inviting us to bring our holiness out into society. Mercy, compassion, generosity, the holy – we will know it when we see it. And, more importantly, we will know it when we participate in it. And it is to be found as we head out those doors. As Pastor Emeritus, Reverend Anderson used to always say here at Brick at the conclusion of worship, “now the service begins.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Wikipedia

² Sacks, Jonathan, *Covenant & Conversation: Leviticus: The Book of Holiness*, Maggid Books, New Milford, CT, 2015, page 4.