

A Covenant Life
A sermon by Joe Hoffman
February 3, 2008

Last Sunday was a wonderful day. Wasn't it? What a spirit there was in this place as we worshipped – with dancing, with a wonderful anthem, with a variety of music in the service. New members. I want to point your attention to the bulletin and the insert that names all the new members who have joined this year thus far. I think it is worth your time to take it home, read it, attach it to your church directory. We are delighted to have each of these new members as part of our church community. We welcome you.

And then after worship, we had a potluck downstairs. I know there were 231 in worship, and I would guess 150 or more downstairs for the luncheon. And again, what a spirit. Young and old, members and friends and visitors – all of us gathered around a table with delicious food that we shared with one another. I am grateful for the deacons for initiating the once a month after church pot luck. And especially grateful to Kevin Mayfield and Christopher Oakley for their work in organizing this one.

Our next pot luck will come on the same day as the annual meeting – Feb. 17. It will be sponsored by the Open and Affirming Committee, which will also be hosting the Loving Families exhibit in our art gallery. The exhibit will be on display this coming Saturday for about 3 weeks – I hope you will take time to see the photographs and read the stories of couples and families in our community – including our own Mary Cowal and Mary Etta Perry.

Now I mention that annual meeting because we will be voting on proposed constitution and bylaws – which are the governing rules for our church. And I want you to pick up your copy – which has slightly been revised since our conversation last week – and take it home to read before the meeting. Our bylaws guide us in making decisions as a community. Help us order our life together. And that is kind of what the book of Leviticus is. It is a civil, legal, liturgical, moral, religious collection of rules or requirements that Israel was to obey – and they were written about 400 years after the exodus from Egypt. They were important in that day.

As we read them today, we get a glimpse into their life and times. And if we read this book with some context from history, we will come to know even better that these rules were written for the wellbeing of that community. But rules and regulations need to change with the times. We are revising our bylaws because they are outdated. We have changed, and we need a governing document that fits who we are today. The same is true for Leviticus. We would no longer find the rules in this book to be very helpful – in fact, some people still pick and choose from these rules to make their point in today's world – which has often been the case when people argue that homosexuality is wrong. They pull a verse out from Leviticus and quote it. But they then don't acknowledge another verse that says – you shall not eat pork, (because pigs carry diseases we do not know how to treat!) or a child shall be killed for not honoring a parent.

We have to read these old texts with some thought to the time and place and context.

Jesus talked about these laws and regulations. He would often say – you have heard it said, but I say to you ... And in so doing, he was not throwing out the old law, but trying to help people see the heart of it. Sometimes it is not the specifics of the law that we need to cling to – but the spirit of why they were important to begin with. And we have to rethink the specifics in accordance to our own context and life experience. If we hold to the old law, the old way, we are not allowing God to still be alive and breathing and dancing and moving in our midst. God can never be reduced to a set of laws or customs or particulars. God will always be mystery and grace beyond our knowing.

What the writers of these laws did was take the old laws – the 10 commandments for example – and bring them back into the heart of the new law. Honor father and mother. Keep the Sabbath. Do not worship or turn to idols. Do not steal. Do not swear in God's name. And so forth. It is the same as we did with our constitution – we took the statement of belief from the old constitution and kept the heart of it – while adding our latest thinking about our theology and identity. We took the wisdom of the past and added it to the wisdom of today.

But enough about by laws and constitutions. What is at the heart of this text? This holiness code that is the core of Leviticus. I want to make it simple – and to use the thoughts of Walter Brueggemann in doing so.

To be holy is to imitate God.
To imitate God is to do justice.
To be holy is to do justice.

Holiness is not isolated as a personal attribute or characteristic that we live out on our own. It is centered in how we relate to our neighbor. The laws of this holiness code link the reality of our neighbor to the reality of God.

Do not harvest all of your crop – but deliberately leave some of the harvest for the poor and the sojourner. This may cut into your profit a bit, but it is part of the covenant that we care for one another.

You shall not oppress or rob your neighbors. You shall not curse those who are deaf. You shall care for all the people in the community. You shall seek the welfare of all.

You shall be holy when you do these things.

I still wonder what to do with this covenant understanding. When I drive to the church early in the morning – as I do on Sundays – I see those who have no houses coming out of the woods from the places they camp, carrying their belongings on their backs, heading toward AHOPE or such a place to get something to eat, to use the bathroom. And I think of what it means to be holy. To care for my neighbor. What does that mean?

This past week a woman stopped by the office, she was obviously in a great deal of pain because she had three teeth that were abscessed and needed to be pulled. She had tried to get into the ABCCM dental clinic, but had not been one of the first 8 that they could take that day. They told her to wait until Monday. She told me this story with tears streaming down her face. She said – I followed the rules, I called when I was supposed to, they put me on hold, and then they never came back. After 15 minutes I hung up and called again. They again put me on hold, and by the time it was over, they had no room left for me.

So we went over and in the end, one of the 8 canceled and we got her in that day. But I know that if I have a hurting tooth, I can call my dentist and get in quickly. What does it mean to care for my neighbor who is left out of our federal budget and who depends upon the kindness and good will of the community to receive the care she needs? What does it mean for us to be in a covenant relationship with God and one another? What does it mean to be holy?

I saw in the paper this past week of women in Haiti I think – making mud cakes. Not to play with, but to eat. They would add some oil, maybe a little leavening, and bake the mud. It was how they stayed alive without starving. Who is my neighbor? What does it mean to be in covenant relationship with God and each other? What does it mean to be holy?

I read in the paper that the president is presenting a budget to Congress that decreases social services by about 3% and increasing the Pentagon budget by about \$35 million. I see those who are hungry. I see those who have no medical care. I see those who are mentally ill and have no help. I look at this budget and I wonder – what can I do? Who is my neighbor? What does it mean to be in covenant with God and each other? What does it mean to be holy?

I wish I knew the answers. I wonder sometimes if I really want to be holy after all. Maybe I prefer to just be a nice guy. Maybe I prefer to do charity instead of justice. It doesn't demand as much from me. Sometimes I wonder. And sometimes I wonder if I confuse being holy with feeling safe or comfortable or even grounded.

We can argue all we want about specific laws and regulations in Leviticus. Should we accept gays and lesbians? Should we eat pork? Should we ... whatever. But the heart of the text calls us to be in covenant with God and with our neighbor. The call is to be holy by being just. Maybe we need to talk more about this – and less about those things that we most often fight about.

Do you want to be holy? Are you ready to invest your life in the journey? To speak for the changes that we need so that all are cared for? Do you want to be holy? Do you?