

## BE HOLY

There's probably no book in the Bible with a more gnarly reputation than Leviticus. Even if you've never read it, you may have had conversations with some people who have; and because of them and their rather questionable understanding of it, you're pretty sure you don't want to read it.

Leviticus has one single verse in it that has been used over the years to judge and condemn gays and lesbians; but did you know that it also has dozens of other very specific prohibitions—you could call them “no-no” laws—banning behaviors that are quite common and uncontroversial today.

For example, Leviticus prohibits trimming your beard. It warns against getting tattoos. It says not to wear clothes with two different kinds of fabrics—so, everyone who wears yoga pants, or shirts that are a blend of cotton and polyester, woe unto you.

Did you know that Leviticus forbids disrespecting your mother or father—and for those of us who have done so anyway, it calls for our death? Leviticus outlaws eating shrimp and lobster. Yes, even for Mainers like us! So I guess that means we shouldn't go out for lobster rolls after church.

And, Leviticus contains what, to me, is the most outrageous prohibition of all: eating bacon! Imagine the catastrophic nationwide effect it would have if Bible-believing folk ever started taking Scripture seriously enough to ban bacon! Restaurants like *The Egg and I* would go out of business; and people would be wandering the streets, glassy-eyed and withering away for lack of bacon fat. . . .

You see, that's what can happen when we open the book of Leviticus. We begin to think or talk in ways that sound pretty absurd.

It's hard to know what to do with this book. For churches like ours that take the Scripture readings on Sunday mornings from the three year lectionary cycle, we hardly ever hear from Leviticus. And on the rare occasions that we do, most of the controversial verses in it have been passed over to save us—the preacher and the listener—from having to wrestle with some harsh legalities.

If we want to incorporate the book of Leviticus into our faith, we should probably ask which of its teachings we should honor, and which are okay to disregard while still remaining faithful to God. But we might also ask, what good

are the Levitical rules, anyway? A lot of people have been damaged, emotionally and spiritually, by religious legalism, and they never want to go back to it. So, should we ignore Leviticus altogether, or make bacon jokes about it?

The problem with disregarding it is Jesus. Because it seems that Jesus had a great deal of admiration for Leviticus. One time, long ago, people asked Jesus what the greatest commandment in all of Scripture was—which of God’s laws shows us the way to Eternal life? Jesus answered first from Deuteronomy: “Love God with all of your heart and soul and strength.” And then, without a pause, he added his favorite verse from Leviticus: “And love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love your neighbor. The heart of Jesus’ ethical vision for life and human relationships is taken verbatim from Leviticus. So, Jesus took that book seriously. And, maybe we, his followers, need to take it more seriously than we do now.

Let me say at this point that Jesus wasn’t merely lifting specific lines from his Bible out of context to make a point; he was showing us how to read and understand the whole book of Leviticus, including its harsher, punitive rules. Some Bible scholars believe that Jesus’ entire ministry is an extensive commentary on the core message of Leviticus.

So, what is this book’s central message?

It’s not about lobster or bacon or sex or haircuts. It’s about holiness.

The opening verse of this morning’s reading from Leviticus begins with God instructing Moses: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’”

Be holy. Leviticus teaches how human holiness is a reflection of God’s holiness. So, think of this book as a user’s manual for how a person comes to live a holy life, and how a community of God’s people becomes a holy witness to God.

Now, some might raise an objection and argue that Leviticus is too outdated and legalistic to tell us what holiness looks like today. And even if it did tell us, if holiness entails following a long, sometimes ridiculous list of archaic rules, I guess I’d rather not be holy.” I think one of the reasons for such thinking is that “holiness” in our world has come to mean extreme self-righteousness and a holier-than-thou attitude. But in its intended form, and the way Jesus saw it, holiness is something to admire and respect, and is worthy of striving toward in our lives. For example:

Martin Luther King was a holy vessel of divine speech, calling all of us to a higher, more godly concept of righteousness and justice.

Mother Teresa was a holy presence in the world, acting with compassion and caring for thousands of unfortunate people the world ignores or denigrates.

Fred Rogers—affectionately known to us as Mr. Rogers—used to broadcast holiness through the TV and into the homes of countless children so they could hear Jesus’ message of acceptance: “I love you. I care about you. You matter.”

I would argue that every one of us know women and men who radiate holiness, at least to to some degree: maybe that person is in your family, or in your neighborhood, or even here among us in this congregation. They’re not perfect, of course, because no human being can be, but even so they bless others with their presence, give them dignity, and lift them to a higher, better place in life.

Sometimes holiness reveals itself not so much through people as through hallowed moments. If you’ve ever spent time with someone who is dying and were allowed to share that sacred journey; if you had a child; if you have ever been held in someone’s loving, accepting arms; if you’ve ever been undeservedly and fully forgiven by a person you’ve badly hurt; or if you have ever put your God-given gifts to good use in service to others, then give thanks to God, because you have experienced holiness in your life.

In Leviticus God tells us, I am holy; and you are my people, my children, so you must be holy too. But how? How do we become holy?

Well, for one thing, don’t be fooled into thinking that holiness requires you to go outside of your ordinary, everyday life—on retreats to monasteries or long, solitary walks in the woods or in deep, radiant prayer sessions. Those things are good and positive, to be sure; but they are not holiness. Holiness, Leviticus says, is something we discover in community with each other, in the many day-to-day choices we make that bring us together.

The book of Leviticus teaches that God is invested and present in every aspect of our lives. Every bite of food we eat expresses our oneness with the Lord. And our relationships with others are as important as our worship. In other words, there is no divide between the secular and the sacred. We don’t leave this church and enter a totally separate world “out there.” The secular and the sacred are one, says Leviticus; therefore, an encounter with the Holy or an act of holiness, by us or someone else, is possible anywhere and everywhere, any place and at any time.

It’s almost funny how passionate the writers of Leviticus were in their insistence that God and holiness can be found in the details of ordinary life. Maybe they were afraid we wouldn’t get that, so at the end of some of their commands they repeated the same refrain: “I am the Lord.”

“Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD.

“Do not speak badly of others. I am the Lord.”

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

That might strike you as a little overbearing, a little over the top, but what parent hasn't made the same kind of statement when asked by their child, “Why do I need to clean my room?” The only inarguable answer is, “Because I'm your father, or I'm your mother, that's why.”

“I am the Lord” is the divine equivalent of, “Because I told you to.” It's God's way of telling us, this thing I want you to do is good, so do it; It will make you a better person. Someday you will understand, and you will thank me because it will make you a better friend, family member, a better member of our faith community. Do this thing I tell you and it will dignify your life and your life in community with others. Believe that, because “I am the Lord.”

Yes, some of the commands in Leviticus are dated, some are kind of silly, and some are even appalling. But many faith communities adapt, write and update their own holiness codes for their own time. They make their own particular rules, inspired by God's law, to guide members of that community and show them how to be holy. Our congregation's holiness code is declared in our church's Statement of Purpose, which includes things like:

“[Being] united in love as a family of believers encouraging commitment to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.”

“[Remaining] faithful in the preaching and teaching of God's Word.”

“[Giving] people a feeling of oneness in worship, prayer and fellowship.

And, “[Extending] love and friendship to all in a way that will make everyone feel truly welcome.”

To which we could add, “I am the Lord.”

There are things that we, as God's people, are called to do to promote and protect human dignity. And so long as that's true, the book of Leviticus can be useful. Leviticus says that God has a plan to enhance our lives and make us holy. We take on the holiness of God through what we eat; when we don't cheat or steal; when we speak the truth and strive to build others up rather than tear them down. We reflect God's holiness when we treat those who are weak with compassion and care.

Holiness is welcoming newcomers into our community with open arms. It's making sure the hungry are fed and the sick are cared for. Holiness is treating every person with equal value and striving for, as our nation's Pledge of Allegiance says, liberty and justice for all.

Those things aren't just a list of random rules; they are a God-inspired vision of life here on earth that God intends for every human being to have. They are the Gospel, the very same Good News that a wandering teacher from Nazareth named Jesus, who loved Leviticus, came to proclaim. Jesus taught from the book of Leviticus all the time.

One of our Savior's most famous sermons, which he proclaimed on a mountain, begins in the fifth chapter of Matthew. It was a sermon that taught the importance of daily choices: don't be angry, he preached. Don't hold grudges, even against your enemies and those who have done you harm. Don't objectify people sexually. Don't mistreat others. Care for the needy and impoverished in your midst. And we could declare after each of those teachings, "I am the Lord."

The inspiration for those teachings of Jesus was Leviticus. Jesus was preaching that book. And he summed up his own way of life and the way of life he called his followers to abide by when he said: "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, "Be holy, because the Lord your God is holy."

My friends, in life, it all matters. Every relationship we have, every choice we make, from keeping the Sabbath and what we put in the offering plate to feeding the hungry and treating every person and animal with the dignity and respect they deserve, it all matters to the Lord. My prayer is that we will live in such a way that we show God by our actions that it matters to us, as well.

I will end my message with this charge: by the love of God in Jesus Christ, and with the help and power of the Holy Spirit, may we strive, as God commands, to "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." Amen.