

Pentecost XX (October 18, 2020)
Texts: Leviticus 19: 1-21, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46
“Be Holy”

“You shall be holy for I the LORD your God am holy . . .” What does it mean to be “holy”?

It does not mean to be “perfect.” God would not require that of us, since He knows that this would be impossible. We may sometimes think we came pretty close to this, since we so often like to think of ourselves as the star (sometimes even the hero) in our own movie. But when we are being realistic, we know that being perfect is way beyond our skill set and/or pay grade.

Being “holy” does not mean to be better than the person next to you (no matter who that may be). Here again, we often fall into the trap of wanting to be compared to others, because we’re pretty sure that we will measure up. Remember the Pharisee standing in the temple apart from the Publican in Jesus’ parable? Like him we are inclined to think (if only to ourselves), ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”*** (Luke 18:11) The problem is that there will always be someone who will come out higher on the comparison scale than we — it is a “no win” game.

Being “holy” does not mean being “pretty good.” I said two Sundays ago, we often wind up before God saying something like, *“It’s not everything You want, but it’s good enough.”* But we know full well it is not good enough.

To be “holy” is to be . . . well, let’s explore a bit . . . The Hebrew word in Leviticus is קדוש (kadosh).

In an effort to move my young children away from anything like using God’s name in vain (as, for example, many do with “O my gosh!” which seems to many as better than the one-word “omigod,” but, come on!), I taught them to use this Hebrew word instead. It has the same impact on

your subrational need for an expletive, especially if properly enunciated, plus it does not come close to the command not to use God's name "in vain" (from the Latin, *vanus*, "empty, without purpose.") I take considerable delight to this day when one of my adult children will declare a moment of awe with the expression, "Kadosh!" and even greater delight if that comes from one of my grandchildren.

קדוש (kadosh) means "other." To become "other" than what you are now is a movement toward holiness. It is more than being merely "different;" many people are different, which unfortunately in our culture has come to mean "odd, weird, or substandard," and therefore to be shunned. קדוש has the implication of transformation, of something given from outside yourself. Luther argued that all of what it means to live life as a disciple of Christ is *extra nos* — from outside ourselves. So to "be holy" is to be moving away from what you are now.

So what are you now? We are, all of us, broken people in some way. Just look at the list of commands from Leviticus to today's First Lesson. Is there anyone here who can say they've dodged an accusation? Didn't pervert justice? Then did you show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly? (You did? Boy, you're good.) Never spread slander? (Good for you!) Never did anything to endanger your neighbor's life? Do not hate . . . in your heart . . . ever? Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. Aw, and you were doing so well . . . did not seek revenge or bear a grudge . . .

Okay, so we admit our brokenness . . . we call it sin.

But there's more: If the statistics are right, there are people sitting in our midst right now who were sexually abused as children (most of you are female). Think what kind of brokenness that means for life as an adult. Okay, that's a bunch of us. What about the rest?

Studies have shown that everyone in this room has suffered (perhaps too strong a term . . . "not been provided"?) from a childhood deficit. I don't want to unnecessarily blame parents . . . who had no control over some

things . . . didn't know what to do with other things . . . but did you as a child . . . Suffer in an accident? Go through an illness? Watch a parent or sibling suffer in that way? Experience hunger, or need to be moved from your home? Did you witness the death of a parent or grandparent? Those are fairly common experiences in childhood, and if they happen apart from the strong and vital support of what are called "empathic caregivers," they have lasting negative impact.

Parents were and are also broken people, so that they just could not give everything you needed. You may have had an absolutely splendid childhood; but every one of us has come to this point in life with a deficit in how we developed. We didn't get something.

[By the way, there's hopeful news in this. Look for a book entitled, Growing Up Again. In it, authors Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson argue that, if there is something you may be lacking from when you were growing up, it's not too late to get it now. They take you through all the things you need (and I do mean all) from every stage of your infant to youthful development and want you to realize that, if you missed something you needed, or got something you most certainly did not need, you can "parent yourself" at any stage to see to it that you get it, or get over it, now.]

Okay, so we have all come up somewhat short, some of us more so than others, but all of us wind up with deficits. And now we are told to be "holy"? Come on!

Let's see what holiness might look like. Each of us has been given by God core longings that we simply must have met. Here they are:

Whether we know it or not, we long for fellowship with God.

We want and need a secure and safe environment.

We are unfulfilled without a sense of worth.

We desire to be unique and special.

We deeply look to be loved and to love.

We seek to be enjoyed and to enjoy.

We are restless to find fulfilment and meaning in life.

Here's the thing — we keep trying to meet these longings in all the wrong places.

We think we can provide ourselves with security.

We try to find worth in people-pleasing.

We look for our worth in our checking account.

To feel special we act out — get attention.

We confuse sex for love.

We look for enjoyment in trivialities (Neil Postman wrote a book some years ago with the title, Amusing Ourselves to Death; it holds true today).

Is it a wonder that so few of us feel fulfilled . . . have meaning? The target was always to be God. But we look elsewhere.

Jesus quotes the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in today's Gospel: ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” . . . “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

Do you love God? Sometimes more than others? In some ways? Often not sure? With all your heart and soul and mind?

Do you love your neighbor? . . . sometimes . . . when the neighbor deserves it?

The problem actually begins in love of self. Most of us live with lies that have been spoken into us . . . and perpetuate them with lies we tell ourselves. Do you know what's important about your past? It's not the events; it's not what “happened.” It's what you tell yourself happened . . . the story you devise to explain what happened. But some stuff happened before you could think . . . so you don't have a story, just feelings.

What's the story you tell you about you? Do you tell yourself lies (“*I'm no good!*” “*I don't matter.*” “*I can't . . .*”)? Do you tell others lies about you (to make yourself look or feel better)? Whatever it is . . . there is one more liar always on the scene: Satan . . . and what a story he'd like to

have you believe!

So how do I learn to love myself so that I can love God and others? (Wait, isn't that the reverse of what Jesus said?) Think of it this way: Primary Goal: Loving God; Secondary Goal: Loving others; Tertiary Goal: Loving self. You're never going to get to Goal #1 unless you complete (or at least work on) Goal # 3.

After my knee surgery, I was told that I could go home once I had negotiated a set of stairs. Guess what was my primary goal? (Negotiate the stairs!) But I couldn't until I had relearned how to manage crutches, and gained strength enough just to maneuver on level ground, or even get myself out of bed or a chair . . .

So how do you learn to love yourself? Immerse yourself in a supportive group (St. Thomas is, for many of us, such a group; but it's a tad too large when we really need intimacy). So find (assemble, invite together) a smaller group (4,6,8 people) and begin to share.

Share what ... and how? Here's a simple plan (I give recognition to Pastor Ron Duer for this):

Agree to come together for a set time (every Tuesday at 7:00 pm; every other Wednesday at 10:00 am; once a month on the fourth Friday).

Agree to be together for a set time (maybe an hour; for sure not more than two hours).

Begin each session by asking, "*Who needs time today?*" (If there are four people who have agreed to meet for one hour, each person gets fifteen minutes to share what's on their heart or mind. If only one person indicates the need, that person gets the entire hour).

You must all agree that whatever is shared is and will remain held in strict confidence — that's an absolute "must."

Over time, you will develop trust, and when there is trust you will open up to one another and find that loving others makes you more honest

about loving yourself (warts and all). Will I then love God “*with all [my] heart, and with all [my] soul, and with all [my] mind*”? No . . . but the key is movement.

There’s an old joke about a guy who’s standing under a street lamp looking around on the ground at his feet. His friend comes up to him to ask what he’s looking for. He says, “I dropped my wallet.” After some time helping him look around the street lamp, without success, the friend says, “I don’t see it anywhere here.” The man replies, “Oh, it’s nowhere near here.” The friend asks, “Then why are you looking here?” The man says, “Because here the light is so much better.”

We are in the opposite position. We stand in darkness and need to step into the light. Not because we need to find something; we need to have the light find us. If I need to get under that light, continuing to stand here won’t do.

The closer we can draw into the light, the better. For most of us, it will not be a blinding experience, where suddenly we are flooded with light and, like Moses, come down from Mt. Sinai glowing so brightly that others cannot stand to be in our presence. But as we draw in closer, there are fewer shadows, we can see more clearly, we begin to sense the warmth.

That whole experience — for some, a moment in time; for others, moments over time; and for still others, most of us, a lifetime — is what it means to be “other” . . . **שׁוֹדֵק** (kadosh) . . . “holy.”

Amen.