

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 Pastor Bill Uetrict 7 Epiphany 2/20/11

I have to admit it. Sometimes the Bible can be a bit weird, a bit odd, really different. Its oddness, its weirdness can be seen especially in a book like Leviticus. I dare you to go home and read this book. And you'll see what I'm talking about. You'll experience headlines like this: clean and unclean foods, purification of women after childbirth and their menstrual cycle, and my all time favorite-concerning bodily discharges. Now some of you are into that kind of stuff and would find the reading fascinating, but most of us who live in 2011 would think that this stuff really is quite weird. Leviticus tells me I shouldn't eat shrimp, that I shouldn't plant corn and green beans in the same garden, and that I shouldn't wear clothing with two different kinds of fabric. J.Qe cotton with the polyester has got to go! That's weird. That's odd.

And that's the point. Israel is supposed to be different. It's not supposed to look and act like its neighbors. In the flow of the Biblical story Israel is about to go into the Promised Land. And Moses is getting the people ready for that entrance. And he's telling them that they can't be just like those other people, those other nations that are in the land to which they are going. They need to be different. They need to be a bit weird. In today's first reading Moses tells the whole people of Israel that they are to be holy, different, distinct, odd, weird, just as the Lord your God is holy, unusual, distinct, set apart, sacred. And then Moses goes on to describe what that holiness looks like, what it looks like to be a distinct, unusual, holy people.

Now before I describe some of that distinctness, that unusualness I want to slow down to underscore why Israel needs to be unusual. They are to be unusual because **God** is unique. They are to be different because God is different. They are to act in a certain way not because

Moses wants to make it tough on them, not because he wants to limit their fun, not because they will earn points with somebody like Mom or the pastor or a group of elders if they are holy, not because life will go smoothly if they follow all the rules. They are to be holy because God is holy. They are to be different because God is different. Their character is to be shaped by the character of God.

You need to get this. God is loving. God is compassionate. God is forgiving. God is gracious. God has a heart for the left out, the poor, the hungry. God is just. That's not how the world is, but that is how God is. Hear this and hear it really well. You are so loved. You are so much a recipient of the compassion of God. You are so forgiven. You are so not the left out. You are so the included. You and your neighbors and the folks across the street and the folks in Asia, Central America, Africa, and South America are so a part of the dream of God for a just world. Now therefore, be like God. Be loving. Be compassionate. Be forgiving. Remember the poor and the alien. Do not take your neighbor's stuff. Help them take care of it. Speak the truth to one another. Help the disabled out. Don't make fun of them or make their lives difficult. Don't slander other people. Make sure that you help them defend their reputation. And get over your grudges. What good do they do you anyway? Be different because God is different!

You know, I think that is the effect of Jesus' teaching from Matthew today. In this teaching, in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus just ups the expectations quite a bit. He highlights what people have heard before--"you have heard it said"--but goes on to describe what his experience of God leads him to teach now--"but I say to you." Jesus not too long ago in Matthew told his disciples that they

are to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and the Scribes. Let's face it. The Pharisees were really righteous guys, or at least it seemed. What Jesus' disciples are to be up to in their lives, in the life of the kingdom, is to be qualitatively different from what the lives of the Pharisees bring. Their lives are to reflect a greater difference than what the lives of Pharisees brought to Israel.

And Jesus in today's reading describes that difference, those higher expectations. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." I know this is weird. I know that this isn't how the world operates. I know that in the world settling the score is what it is all about. I know how your friends operate. But you are to be holy. You are to be different, distinct. You are to be weird. Why? Because our God is holy. Our God is different. Our God is distinct. Our God doesn't even settle the score. Our God gives good gifts to the evil and the just alike. God makes his sun rise on the evil **and** the good, and sends rain on the righteous **and** the unrighteous. That's the way God is. And that's why we are to love our enemies as well our neighbors. And if our neighbors are the enemies then we are to love them, too! God loves his enemies. We are to do as well.

Now I want to point out something here. And Jesus doesn't say this directly in today's reading, but some scholars think that he is definitely implying what I am about to say. You know what an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth brings us? It brings us a lot of toothless and eyeless people. You know what slapping someone who has slapped you brings you? Two people who have blood running down their cheeks! You know what bearing a grudge does for you? It makes

you miserable. It makes you bitter. It takes the joy out of your living. Sometimes people don't want to be around you because you got such a big chip on your shoulders. You know what vengeance gets you? Further vengeance from somebody else.

We have had a big problem here in Muskegon over the past year or two wit~eople trying to even the score. You know what that got 'us? Blood, death, grief, deep pain, more violence. Violence begets violence. Come on now!

It's time for us to be different because our God is different. It's time for us to get over the scorekeeping. It's time for us to get beyond vengeance because our God doesn't keep score. It's time for us to go the second mile because that is what our God does. The cross of Jesus Christ is the sure sign that God goes to all lengths for the sake of the world. It's time for us to be generous because our God is generous. Life isn't about holding on. Life is about letting go. It's time to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect!

Whoa! Now I've unsettled you a bit! Perfect, how can lor we be perfect? Unfortunately, "perfect" is probably a bad translation. The word used for perfect in the Greek means complete. It refers to a fullness, to reaching a goal fully. It is time for us to be fully compassionate and loving because our God is complete love and compassion. Our God is fully in love with the world and with you. It's time for us to live fully out of that love. Just touching love once in a while isn't enough. Just practicing a little love when you feel it isn't enough. It's time for our lives to reflect the fullness of the love of God.

Now I know. That may make us look a little weird, a little different. But our God is different. Our God is distinct. So be a little weird. Be distinct. Be holy!