

2020 10 25 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 & Matthew 22:34-46

**Title: “Reprove”**

Theme: The Compassionate Life, Ukama Sunday

Intro:

The book of Leviticus, the 3rd book in the Hebrew Bible, the 3rd book in the canonical bible: Leviticus gets a bad reputation. Leviticus is known mainly for being the book of law in the Hebrew Bible. It is considered a priestly book. Christian communities throughout the world pick certain parts of Leviticus to highlight, as our lectionary reading has today. We jumped from verse 2 to verse 15. It is important for us to name that not some, but all, Christian communities decide which parts of the sacred text they will highlight. Groups that call themselves literalists usually are not such and many of us who say we take the bible seriously but not literally do, in fact, sometimes laugh at the language from 2000 years ago and more. Let's start with this honesty: Christian communities do not agree about which parts of Leviticus should be emphasized.

Leviticus 19:19 is an interesting verse right after the pericope read today, for example. In Leviticus 19:19 we read that we should not wear polyester and cotton at the same time. . . that is a tough rule to follow today. . . I have many a clothing item that consist of multiple types of fabric. My backpacking pants, my soccer clothes.

This being said, we might be immediately skeptical of considering Leviticus at all for the 21st century. However, this particular piece of scripture in Leviticus has a striking similarity to words we see time and again throughout scripture and sacred texts all over the world: Love your neighbor.

It is important for us to remember that all of these laws being named in Leviticus, the whole point of these laws is to point the reader or hearer to a holy life.<sup>1</sup> The point is to live honorably before God. The priestly authors (and the orators at the time that these texts were read aloud because of the lack of literacy) were trying to show people that in the careful observance of statutes community members would be closer to the divine. They were showing people that they're actions mattered.

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<sup>1</sup>The New Oxford Annotated Bible. "Leviticus," in *The Pentateuch*, ed. Marc Z. Brettler & Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

It is notable that throughout Leviticus some laws are directed at the general population and some are directed at the religious leaders. This chapter is for the general population in the community or the laity.<sup>2</sup> This chapter is for us, too.

Another part of this text that is worth reiterating are these words at the very beginning which we hear throughout the Hebrew Bible: “Speak to the congregation of the people of Israel.” This happens to Moses more than once and it also happens to the former and latter prophets.

We can imagine that it must have been pretty tough for Moses but also that he knew he had to communicate what God asked him to.

As we work to understand this text, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor encourages us to first consider the strong differences between translations of the text.<sup>3</sup> We use the New Revised Standard Version in our tradition but many communities look to the New International Version. Looking just to verse 17a read today we heard in the NRSV: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin,” which is a bit different from the NIV: “Do not hate your brother in your heart.”

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<sup>2</sup>Bible, “Leviticus.”

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, “Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2013), 197.

We might notice immediately that one is far more specific than the other. As we notice similarities and see the word hate we might think immediately of the word love and the number of times it is emphasized throughout the Hebrew Bible itself but also in Jesus' ministry. As the word hate is emphasized in almost all translations we can imagine one goal here is to point us to its opposite: love.

And when we consider the word kin as compared to the specificity of brother more might come up. With the word kin we might have a more general association to community and church life as in Paul's epistles. With the other, the specificity of brother might remind us of texts like those of the prodigal son or of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three who were like brothers. We might find ourselves asking questions of who we call our kin and why?

When we look at Paul's letters to the communities from the first century next to stories like that of the prodigal son, we notice that there is this underlying message of grace and care – one that is unbelievable and therefore emphasized over and over. Similarly, the God that is shown in the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is one who saves a kin group who are in a fiery furnace. That story shows a divine comfort and the power of miracle. And the words of miracle for us today come in verse 2b: "You shall be holy, for I, God, am holy." This is not easy for us humans to hear because we have been shamed and put down in our world.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes: “This refrain [You shall be holy, for the Lord your God I am holy] This refrain or a variant of it occurs over and over in chapter 19, cementing the connection between human behavior and identity. While different Christian traditions take different tacks on this connection, at least one conclusion that may be drawn is that God does not ask people to do what they cannot do.”<sup>4</sup>

You shall be holy. YOU.

The one of us did judge our someone in an unjust way.

Those of us who were, who are partial to the poor and who defer to the great.

Those of us who have slandered.

We, we who have indeed profited by the loss of others, of another. We too shall be holy. The Lord your God is holy.

You, you shall be holy.

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<sup>4</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, “Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2013), 195.

And we might be tempted to simply look nationally and globally for the struggles of our day but we must do our very best to look internally and right at home for our struggles: how have we done misjudged and slandered when we have called to be holy? Similarly, how will we point ourselves back towards this divine connection?

As I often like to say, the proof is in the pudding this week. I think our grace, besides the declared holiness, is right in the text. Verse 17b: “You shall reprove your neighbor,” When I started to do some digging in Strong’s exhaustive concordance (looking both to the Hebrew, the Greek and Aramaic), I saw that it was clear that the word reprove could be argued to be another but it is the one we have heard today. As I reflected on its contemporary definition: Reprove – to correct, especially gently, I found a deep comfort.

See here is a lawful text not only reminding us of our deep holiness and connection to God but also encouraging us to be gentle, rather than judging in a malicious way. Could we imagine a world where we aimed to do more reproofing rather than insulting? More importantly, how can we encourage such differences in our own lives?

Perhaps we shouted at the person closest to us. Our text has called us to reprove. To correct, especially gently.

Perhaps we shouted at the television. Our text has called us to be holy, for the Lord our God is holy.

Perhaps we did profit from the loss of another. Our text has called us to reprove: To correct, especially gently. How can we gently correct our own wrongs? How can we treat ourselves as beloved *and* right a wrong we have done?

Perhaps we slandered someone for no real reason, it was just something we did. Our text has called us to be holy, for the Lord our God is holy.

We see Jesus' deep Jewishness in this text and it is critically important for us to continue to name this. Taylor finally points out that in both the Hebrew Bible reading for today and the Matthew text, "There is no way to mirror the holiness of God without benefiting the neighbor. In both teachings, the way of life for one includes a way of life for all."<sup>5</sup>

The way of life for one includes a way of life for all.

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<sup>5</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, "Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2013), 199.

So how will you mirror the holiness of God this week? Maybe you plan to cast your vote?

Maybe you plan to pick up food for the food pantry.

Maybe you have nothing left to give so you'll go back to scripture every morning or night to fill up your own well.

Maybe you'll dig a bit deeper into prayer as you have been partially laid off and now find yourself with more time on your hands.

Maybe you'll just commit to making your coffee or tea each morning and call a friend who is also struggling through this pandemic, for we all are.

As you go into the world this week, I pray that you find that mirror of God in the places and things you encounter. Perhaps in the Pemi River you see God's light shining on the river the few days we'll find some sunlight.

Perhaps you'll feel ever aware of the sacrifices grocery store and restaurant worker is making during this trying time. God is being mirrored for us, and we are called to reflect this. Stand before a mirror or puddle this week, remind yourself of the sacred text as Moses declared: "You shall be holy, for the Lord, your God is holy."



## Bibliography

- Bartlett, David L. & Barbara Brown Taylor. "Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Homiletical Perspective." In *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, edited David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 195-199. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2013.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fifth Edition, New Revised Standard Version. "Exodus." In *The Hebrew Bible, The Pentateuch*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, & Pheme Perkins, 81, 102-103. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.