

Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2017

Holy Community

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Matthew 5:38-48

The book of Leviticus tells us, in verse 19:2, "to be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Then, in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear from Jesus in his sermon on the mount, that we are to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

A consistent biblical testimony presents itself: be holy and be perfect. While holiness and perfection are distinct terms, the pressures are the same. God tells us to be more than what we are in our basic condition. We are called to strive toward a goal. A goal of holiness like that of God's, a goal of perfection like God's perfection.

Perfection is a constant pressure. Today this is something we witness all the time in our media. Any time you see a magazine cover, with a cover girl, you see this pressure played out. These images have layers and layers of editorial teams working to craft the perfect picture. Models who grace the covers of magazines are featured because they are good looking, but that is not enough. The cover has to be perfect. There has to be the right designer clothes, the proper make up to accord with that style of clothing, then of course the accent pieces- hair, jewelry and shoes to finish the look. The styling teams, or glam squads, who cultivate the cover look include the photographer, the model, the stylist, the make-up stylist, the hair stylist, the accessories stylist, and all their assistants. That is only the first layer of the editorial work because once the photos are taken, they go to an editor who selects the best prints, and then those go to another editorial team who manipulates the photo itself. If this sounds exhausting, then you get it. Efforts this involved are exhausting...but for what end?

While the example of the perfect magazine cover may not resonate with you personally, it serves to illustrate the point that perfectionism is everywhere. Striving towards excellent end goals is a good thing, because the results yield something worthwhile. Those yields may be good grades, good times on your run of a mile, or even doing a good job hitting the budget at the grocery store this week! What is concerning about this kind of perfectionism is the personal orientation, where the goal is self-perfection. In the case of the cover girl, the end goal is to be the fairest of all the land. In the more common place cases, as we strive towards hitting our goals for good grades, fast run times, and staying within the budget at the grocery store, the end goals are to be the smartest, the fastest, or the best grocery shopper! It's very self-centered set of goals.

Perfectionism is an age old phenomenon. While our cultural understanding of perfection today often directly correlates to high performance in a given field, the cultural understanding for perfection in Jesus' time was different. Ancient Greek culture upheld that being unadulterated by the things of this world was the end goal. We see that cultural influence in the Pauline epistles, with the same refrain of living in the Spirit and not in the flesh, repeated in Galatians 5, Romans 8, and Ephesians 2. Alternatively we know of another form of perfection in Jesus' time. That was unflinching adherence to religious law, as is so often associated with the Pharisees and their legalistic understanding of righteousness.

Jesus told us to be perfect. He was combatting the cultural concepts of perfectionism that existed in his day. We are to hear that same message in our contemporary hearing of his proclamation- this is a counter-cultural kind of perfection. Heavenly perfection is different with

Jesus- it combats cultural tides of personal achievement and personal piety that existed in antiquity and persist today. It looks more like investment in the other, not the self alone.

Immediately- with the introduction of another person- an ethical situation is set up. For Jesus, perfection is lived out in right relationship, it is a matter of ethics. Which is why Jesus is telling us to love our neighbor, and to do so in a Godly way. Thankfully he gave us some precepts for so doing.

Anytime you get hit, don't strike back.

Anytime you are sued for property, don't fight back, but willingly give them what you own that they want.

If someone wants you to go that extra mile in whatever sense that may be, you meet their expectations by exceeding their expectations. You go two miles instead.

Of course, anytime you see a beggar you give to them.

Finally, the hardest of all...anytime you want to hate someone as your enemy, love them instead.

Jesus meant business. He was not citing these examples in a hypothetical manner, but in a prescriptive manner. That prescriptive sense creates a temptation...a temptation to then interpret these ethical precepts literally, as absolute prescriptions. However each precept is really an illustration of his overall preaching point- that we are called to live perfectly, in holy community with one another, by abiding in God's love.

If someone hits you, hit back with the love of Jesus.

If someone sues you, court them with divine love.

If someone demands something of you, give back in a generous spirit, like that of the Holy Spirit.

These are not prescriptions that tell us how to specifically respond to any given situation. Rather we are provided a general precept to love perfectly, and the hard work of being a Christian entails figuring out how to adapt that principle to a variety of situations that, frankly, will mostly be complicated.

Jesus was getting at the heart of heavenly ethics. He was pressuring his listeners to be perfect, to always show heavenly love to one another. He was saying that no matter how complicated a situation may be, we are called to rise above our limited ability to love, and to love one another as God loves. To live from agape.

We can acknowledge that heavenly love is not really our first response. Yes Jesus calls us to love perfectly... but none of us are angels. We are not always going to love perfectly. We are sometimes going to hit back with our hands instead of with love; this is in our nature. We tend to react to others with what comes naturally to us, and that often falls short of perfection and is rarely what we would consider to be holy.

We need reminders to be holy as God is holy. Our Almighty Lord got that memo, and wanted to share it with us. In the text from Leviticus, the refrain is present: "I am the Lord your God." It appears in verse 19:2, again in verse 19:10, and a shortened version, claiming I am the Lord, appears in verse 12, 14, 16, and 18. That totals 6 times that God is citing his lordship.

This serves as a reminder that we belong to Adonai. Repeating this refrain proclaims ownership, yes, but it also proclaims relationship. The ethics of holy community include precepts like those taught to us in Leviticus and in Matthew, but the ethics are lived out in community *before God*. To hear a holiness code is to hear more than a code of conduct- it is to hear that God calls us to lean on his perfect holiness to live out that code.

The Lord our God promises to be our partner in this ongoing attempt of ours to love when we don't know how to love. For this we can rejoice, because imitating perfect holiness is a task we need our Almighty Lord's partnership to attempt. When we hear that we are called to "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy," we are also hearing about our own sin. Embedded in that Scripture is

an inherent understanding that we are creatures made in God's image, but we are not holy as our Creator is holy. Rather we will have to strive to imitate holiness from on high.

This is the struggle that is at the heart of Jesus' preaching: to love your neighbor in God's holiness is something we figure out as we live into our Christian identity. It is supposed to be hard- which is why Jesus charges us to strive for perfection.

Soren Kierkegaard is well known for his 3 "stages" that categorize ways of thinking that aid in the development of an individual. The aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. Aesthetics deal with decisions regarding the way we want to cultivate our material world. Ethics deal with decisions regarding others- these are moral decisions. The religious stage is about living a life that is pleasing to God- it subsumes the other two stages, such that all the ethical and aesthetic decisions we make are intended to be to the religious end. Kierkegaard would contend that these stages overlap and intermingle in any variety of situations in life, but the highest of them is the religious stage. It is our ultimate goal to live a life that is both aesthetically and ethically pleasing to God.

These categories have been useful for me in times of distress, when I am struggling to know what to do in a difficult situation. Maybe only the philosophy nerds, like myself, will appreciate this... but I do love the Kierkegaardian logic here. It brings me peace to categorize religious ethics this way. I share this with you, because as orderly Presbyterians, I figured you might appreciate the categories as well.

We will forget, so we will need reminders. We will also struggle through these ethics. We will struggle to know what to do to show Christian love, and we will struggle all the more to then live out that Christian ethic when presented with the opportunity to act as we know we should. And to be fair, we will definitely mess it up completely from time to time.

To put that Kierkegaardian logic in more Christian terms... I like to think of a bit like this: When we forget what it means to love as God loves, the Scriptures remind us what that means. When we struggle to determine the right course of action, we have the Holy Spirit as our guide. We trust God's spirit to reveal truth to us, so that we might know what actions are from God, and with that knowledge we can then act in good faith. Getting the good word is only half the battle. When we struggle to live out those good faith actions, things get harder. I like to think that's when we can turn to the church, to the word, and to our trust in the Lord to see us through. Sometimes that will not even be enough. Despite all of our good Christian efforts, we will just plain mess it up at times...and then, we have Christ's mercy. Alleluia for that!

Friends what I am saying is that thankfully we do not have to live out this difficult call to perfection alone. We have a holy community surrounding us as our guide. Because in his steadfast love for us, God created a multi-layered partnership to set us up for our success in this endeavor. To live in holy community, we need partners by our side. We are well equipped to set ourselves to the task of loving as God loves since our Lord provided partners for the task. The perfection we can strive for in our Christian ethics can be done through partnership- with our divine council. That divine council being God the Father, Jesus, his only Son our Lord, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and one another, as the church. So take heart. Perfection is seemingly unattainable, but if we pull together in Christian community, and call on our partners, we can certainly aim for that heavenly end goal. With God's help.

Amen.

Anastassia C. Sharpe
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA) St. Louis, MO
February 19, 2017