

“The Whole and Holy Difference”
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Cor 3:10-11, 16-23;
Matthew 5:38-48

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Holy! What a word. Some of you may know the hymn: “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty.” When I think about the idea of holiness, it runs together with glory in my mind and I have this vision of brightness, of the wonder of who God is. It’s a way of somehow describing the indescribable nature of who God is. In fact, one way of thinking of the word “holiness” is to think about it as describing the innermost inscrutable nature or essence of God. Holiness.

I have a hard time when I hear Moses telling the people that they need to be holy. It feels to me like only God can be holy. What does it mean to be holy people? I don’t think it means we look like Swiss cheese. What does it mean for us to be holy? I have a hard time thinking about that. But if I do think about what it means for God to be holy, somehow it’s about God being God’s innermost and inscrutable or mysterious self. It’s about God being God.

Perhaps when God asks us to be holy, he’s asking us to be the selves that he created us to be, our innermost inscrutable selves. I think God created everything with possibilities, us included. When he’s asking us to be holy, he’s inviting us to live into the possibility of who we can be, the very human beings he created us to become, the people God gave us the potential to become. Life is a journey into becoming those people, into the possibilities of who Christ shows us we can be.

It’s that idea that we can change over time, that there is some transformational nature to living in this world. Indeed, it seems that God comes again and again to God’s people inviting them into that kind of transformation. Isn’t that what Moses is inviting them to do as they enter the Promised Land—to be holy, to enter into that transformation.

It’s happened over time. There was this guy who was born into a very upper-crust kind of family. He was given the best schooling in the world, but he kept struggling and wondering, “What is this all about? Where do I find meaning?” He tried some of the trending things of the day—the new age kind of experiences. This or that religion was trending, so he tried it. Then he kept encountering these folks who were Christians, and they appealed to him. One day he felt like God spoke to him. He had tried everything that society told him to do and decided to hear what God says. He opened the scripture to Romans 13:13: *Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness (which he had done plenty of), not in debauchery and licentiousness (which he had also done plenty of), not in quarreling and jealousy (he was a professor of rhetoric; a professional quarreler, you might say). Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to satisfy its desires.*

That passage transformed him. At age 31, he became a Christian. Some of you may have heard of this guy. His name was Augustine. He became one of the most well-respected thinkers and leaders of the church. His life was transformed. He became a different person. We probably have heard many stories about how encountering scripture and encountering Christ changes people. We may notice how it changes us. Augustine recognized how much it changed him. He recognized that he had been living a life of futility.

Isn't that exactly what Paul is talking about? Paul is talking about how the wisdom of the world cannot lead us to where we really want to go. We can try over and over again but it doesn't work. It feels like, as we think about somebody like Augustine's story and perhaps some of our own, that we might know that feeling of trying something over and over and feeling like it's futile. It doesn't quite work.

There's a Greek mythological story about Sisyphus. He was a crafty and deceitful king who was all about self-aggrandizement. He kept tricking the Gods, as the story goes. His punishment was to push a rock up a mountain. It would roll back down, and he would have to go back and roll it up again. He had to do that through eternity. That's the story of futility. It's all about a king who decides that self-aggrandizement and deceit is the way to go.

I think that's the same thing that Augustine was experiencing. I think it's that experience we have of life if we think we can get by with deceit, if we can get by with some craftiness. It's the invitation instead to recognize what we need, and what we're given, is God's guidance. That's what Paul points to. He says it's not about our own craftiness; it's not about worldly wisdom. If we really want a foundation that will lead to something that's not futile, if we want a house that stands instead of falling over, or doesn't rot from the base up, we need a foundation. That foundation is Jesus Christ. It is the love of God made real, the love of God come to us, inviting us to live in that. It is upon that foundation, then, that we are invited to build.

That sounds really great and really easy until we begin to listen to what Jesus says about what it means to let him be our foundation and to show us what the plans are for the house. We heard the passage in the children's sermon, as well, about how we deal with violence. That's the idea of turning the other cheek. It may be actual or it may be metaphorical. In fact, you might look at this in two different ways.

One, there are some who say that in Jesus' time, to be struck once would be a backhand strike, which would be a shameful thing. But to present the other cheek means they have to hit you with an open hand, which means you are an equal. To go the second mile with a Roman soldier would be to get him in trouble. He had a right to make you go a mile, but to go a second mile would get him in trouble. Stand up to violence that belittles.

There is probably more to this than it seems. If we don't think about it just in terms of the actual description, but as a metaphor, or as a description that's a little broader, it's

the idea of absorbing violence so that it stops with us, of giving more than is expected of us, of doing more than is expected of us. How many times have people been brought up short because somebody did more than they expected?

He goes on to say it's not just about loving those who love us. I love the illustration Julie gave in the children's sermon about taking the opportunity to practice within our family and to practice, I think, as a family of faith. How do we love one another even when we might disagree? How do we love one another when we have struggles? Jesus invites us not only to love our friends, but our enemies and that is an incredible thing. How do we do that?

It's the same thing Moses is telling the people. He's inviting them to do all these things, to be holy. If we go on then, he talks about how they live their lives. Jesus is inviting us to be perfect just as our Father in heaven is perfect, although I really dislike that translation as "perfect." The word is "teleos" and it really means to come to completion or to be whole. He's inviting us to be wholly human, the wholly human beings that God made us to be. The possibility that he created in us, that we might be the human beings that share both experiencing the love of God and living it out. The love of God both in our lives from God, and the love of God expressed in our lives as we live our lives.

How in the world do we do this? So often people talk about love, love, love as if love were easy, like it's just a warm fuzzy. This love Jesus is talking about is hard. It's not easy. How do I care for somebody that disagrees with me? How do I love somebody that wants to kill me? How do I love somebody who just bugs me? He's inviting us to live a way of life that is hard. How do we do it?

I think we do it by God, because by God I believe there's a way. By God, I believe we have one who guides us. By God, we have one who loves us. By God, we have one who has given us Christ to show us the way. By God we have a way. But it is by God and not by me. It is following Christ. It is through what God has shown us, the way God leads us; it's through doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly. It's through Christ and recognizing the love of Christ given to us, the grace of Christ shared with us that we can begin to live into that. By God, we can be whole and holy people by God. Amen.