

Holy Is As Holy Does

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2009 Leviticus 19:1-2;9-18

Cameron Diaz suffers from it. So does Howie Mandel and Michael Jackson. Reclusive billionaire and aviator Howard Hughes was famous for it. Croatian scientist Nikola Tesla, sometimes called "The Father of Physics" and "The man who invented the twentieth century," struggled his whole life with the condition.

I'm talking about mysophobia. Mysophobia is a term used to describe a pathological fear of contact with potentially unclean surfaces, or a fear of contamination and germs. The popular television show Monk features a detective who has the condition rather severely.

I mention mysophobia this morning because our text for this morning comes from a book of the Bible associated in many minds with laws designed to help us avoid contamination. To put it another way, Leviticus is generally understood as a book about how to be holy, and holiness is often taken to be a form of purity, which is obtained and maintained by avoiding contact with impurity.

The impurity or contamination can be physical – touching dead bodies, eating non-kosher food, or even holding hands with your wife at certain times. Or the impurity or contamination may be spiritual – worship of idols, lustful thoughts, or using the Lord's name in vain. But whatever the form of contamination, purity or holiness is supposed to be achieved through careful avoidance of certain objects, persons, actions or thoughts which are capable of contaminating a person. Holiness, it seems, boils down to being a mysophobe for God. But maybe people have misunderstood. Let's take a closer look at the book of Leviticus. To many a modern reader, Leviticus appears to be the least useful book in the Bible. Much of it is filled with instructions about ancient Israel's sacrificial system. If you want to know what parts of a sacrificial animal were to be burned and what parts of its entrails were to be washed and what was to be done with its blood when making a burnt offering, then Leviticus is for you. If you want to live a nomadic life in the desert, then some of the laws of Leviticus may interest you. And if you're interested in following kosher dietary restrictions, Leviticus could prove helpful. But otherwise, you're likely to find much of this third book of the Old Testament less-than-uplifting reading.

Several years ago, the late British preacher Leslie Weatherhead wrote a book called *The Busy Man's Old Testament* in which he provided an outline

for what he considered to be the most useful parts of the Old Testament for modern readers. He urged people to read those parts, but the vast material in between he generally covered with a few summary sentences. When it came to Leviticus, he advised, “This book concerns itself with the minutiae of the sacrifices on the altar and the sins which demanded such sacrifices. For devotional purposes, the book may be omitted altogether.”

But as Brethren, for whom there is “no creed but the New Testament,” here is something to think about before we dismiss Leviticus: In the New Testament, Leviticus is quoted several times, including by Jesus himself. When Jesus was asked about which commandment was the greatest, he answered by citing two: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind,” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That second one — “Love your neighbor as yourself” — is a quote directly from Leviticus 19, and Jesus said that upon those two commandments hang all the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostle Paul also quotes that verse from Leviticus in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians. What’s more, the New Testament book of James, which almost everybody agrees is a helpful and important biblical book, seems to be a sermon based on Leviticus 19:12-18.

Parts of Leviticus 19 are what we read. And if you noticed, it didn’t have much to do with avoiding contamination. Instead, it had a lot to do with how we treat other people. Here, in the heart of the biblical book known for its emphasis on holiness, we find holiness is not so much about keeping ourselves untainted as it is about seeing that others — especially those in need — are cared for.

Admittedly, parts of Leviticus are written in ways that are hard for us to appreciate or apply. But there is plenty of wisdom in it that requires little “translation.” Start with the advice in verse nine: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes from your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor”

Few of us farm or even garden on a large enough scale to apply this lesson literally. But the message is easy to grasp. Don’t be so intent on gathering all you can that you make life harder on those who have less than you have. In fact, do things that make it easier for the poor to get what they need. That could mean volunteering to teach work-related skills. It could mean donating to food pantries or clothing collections. It could mean giving a seldom-used vehicle to someone who has no transportation and thus can’t find work.

Our text goes on from there, defining holiness as how we treat others – don't lie, don't steal, don't hold back wages, treat the disabled with respect, don't slander. In Leviticus, holiness is not some static state to be preserved; it is an active condition to be pursued. Holy is as holy does.

And Leviticus, like all the other books of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible), is concerned that we not only live by the lessons they present, but teach the lessons to our children. It is great to pursue personal holiness, but it is even better to involve the young in learning to be holy. Let me tell you about someone who did just that.

Raheeja Debakey, a Maronite Christian and Lebanese immigrant in Louisiana, was a skilled seamstress who made finely tailored clothing for her family. Eventually neighbors noticed and asked her to teach their daughters, which she did in her home. Her son Michael was a preschooler at the time, and found himself fascinated by her work, and at his request, she began to teach him how to sew as well. He became quite good at it.

But Michael Debakey, who died last year at 99, said she also taught him something else. He said that equal to his mother's exquisite needle artistry was her compassion for others. Every Sunday she and Debakey's father loaded the family car with extra clothing and homemade meals for the children at the local orphanage. One week, Debakey noticed that his favorite cap was among the giveaway items. When he protested, his mother reminded him that he would get a new cap, but that orphans had no parents to buy them caps. Then she added something Debakey said he had never forgotten: "There's nothing that can warm your heart more than making someone else feel better."

By the way, Michael Debakey became Dr. Debakey, the renowned heart surgeon, helping perform the first coronary artery bypass and developing the machinery necessary to make open heart surgery possible. And he put his sewing skills to work, using Dacron to create patches for grafts on damaged vessels.

As a surgeon, Michael Debakey knew the importance of purity, of keeping the surgical suite free of germs and keeping wounds uncontaminated. But Debakey knew that however important purity may be, it is not really the same thing as holiness. Holiness requires a whole lot more than simply avoiding contamination. Holiness requires a heart that is open to those in need. Holiness requires a determination to be fair, to be kind, to show respect.

Holiness even requires love. Love for God, yes. But you can't stop there. Leviticus says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," if you want to be holy. Jesus reaffirmed that and then took it further. He said, "You have heard it said that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?"

Somewhere along the line, the world has become confused about holiness. Hardly anyone wants to be thought of as holy anymore, mostly because holiness has been confused with fastidiousness, with being prim and proper and avoiding contamination. When we describe someone who is smug in their sense of spiritual superiority, we say that they are "holier-than-thou."

But it isn't a bad thing to be holy, when we take a closer look. Holy is as holy does. Holiness is about treating people right, about being generous, decent, fair, friendly. When it comes to holiness, Jesus is the best example and he was anything but worried about contamination. That was the rap against him – he hung out with the wrong kind of people, he didn't follow the Sabbath rules down to the last jot and tittle, he didn't always remember to wash his hands properly before eating, and he even welcomed women, Gentiles and Samaritans to be his followers. No one could ever mistake Jesus for a mysophobe. But Jesus was holy. Jesus was incredibly holy. Deep in his heart he was committed to doing the will of God, which was to love and help others. And he did so his whole life long. In fact, on the night he was betrayed, he did something no mysophobe would ever do: he took a basin of water, wrapped a towel around himself, and washed his disciples' dirty feet. He wanted them to know how to love and how to live. He wanted to show them how to be holy.

As we continue the journey through Lent, may we take to heart this lesson that Jesus taught. May we strive to be holy – not to appear holy, but to genuinely be holy – by doing the things that love inspires and compassion commands.

Amen.