

October 23, 2011

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost

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

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Living the Great Commandment

Most, if not all of us, are familiar with the Great Commandment: Love God and Love your Neighbor. Maybe we are so familiar with Jesus' Summary of the Law that we miss some things about the power of what he said and the implications of what he said for our lives. The first part of the commandment comes from the giving of the Torah in Deuteronomy.¹ The second part of the commandment—"you shall love your neighbor as yourself"—shows up as part of the great holiness code of Leviticus², and we hear it read today. Loving God and neighbor has something to do with being 'holy.' "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."³ I suspect that I am like most of you in that I don't spend very much time thinking about 'being holy' or thinking about whatever it might mean to be 'holy.' I certainly talk about the church as 'a holy people' and consecrated bread and wine as 'holy things.' It is commonplace in our worship to speak of God as 'holy,' and I've understood that as saying that God is both 'whole,' a being-in-itself, not derivative from something else such as human imagination. When we call God 'holy' I assume that we are saying that God is worthy of devotion and worship, that God is somehow 'other' or exalted. It is almost as though 'holy' is shorthand for all that we imply when we speak of God.

I don't think I speak very often of 'holy' people and when I do I probably mean something like 'saintly' or 'pious' or 'devout.' There's nothing wrong with being any of those things but for me they are tinged a bit with notions of moral self-righteousness, with a bit of prudery perhaps, and if I do think of someone as particularly holy I am mentally assuming that they would not be much fun at a dinner party. None of this is particularly fair or even right, but it brings me up short when I am reminded that the commandment to love is part and parcel of being holy as God is holy. If we have to aspire to being holy, please God may it turn out to be something to which we might genuinely *want* to aspire, and not necessarily about being devout, sainted or noticeably pious.

The importance of holiness for the ancient tribal communities of Israel was that it allowed the possibility of converse with God, without being destroyed. The laws contained in the code are largely appropriate for an ancient, slightly isolated, agrarian society. But the point of the laws was about being righteous or being in right relationship with God and neighbor. To be less than obedient was to threaten life itself. That is a truth that has transcended all the changes of history and all the culture wars

¹ 6:5

² 19:18

³ 19:2

that have attended historical change, especially where the governing of relationship is concerned. In this respect, the ancient commandments are just as applicable to us. "You shall be holy, for the Lord your God is holy." Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself."

So if holiness is not optional for us and is not about being self-righteous or prudish, what might we expect to see in a holiness code for today? I would expect at least three topics to be addressed today which were also addressed in ancient times. First I would expect some chapters about *worship*. In this day and age, I would expect less legalism about liturgical practice than we have seen in the past. Our own John Herring made it all the way through seminary without hearing the old saw about how the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist. The difference is that you can negotiate with a terrorist. We spend a fair amount of time behind the scenes around here doing what we can to make sure that our attention in worship is focused on what really matters and not being drawn to details. In one example, that is why we don't use incense in worship here. There is nothing wrong with it. In plenty of places it serves to accentuate and draw attention to particular aspects of the story that tell us who we are. If we were to use it here, some of us would like it and some of us would hate it. But I guarantee that the conversation after the service would not be about the scripture! In the tradition of this parish it would be unhelpful but does not require a prohibition in our modern holiness code. What we need is a renewed insistence that attendance in worship is essential for holiness. Our Senior Warden returned for a recent visit to our friends in the Diocese of Western Tanganyika struck by how much we accommodate our faith to our lives rather than letting it shape our lives as she witnessed in Tanzania. If it is true that going to church is becoming something that we do when we don't have a better or more compelling offer, then our modern holiness code will address that by reminding us how it is here that we are oriented to what is of ultimate worth and our lives are shaped by what really matters as we hear and enact the story of Jesus. If you love God, you will join in worship as a matter of practice and priority in your life. You shall love the Lord your God and be holy as God is holy.

From there we would see a natural transition to some chapters on community, and how we treat each other. Just as in the agrarian culture reflected in Leviticus, I would want principles that govern how we behave toward each other. In fact we have that to some degree in our baptismal covenant. Seek and serve Christ in all persons. Respect the dignity of every human being, and so on. There are some ecclesiastic shenanigans going on again with the Diocese of South Carolina where some Episcopalians have brought their bishop up on charges of 'abandoning the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church.' While this does not fall in the 'edifying' column, it is interesting what the bishop has said in his own defense. He has accused the church of preaching a "false doctrine of indiscriminate inclusivity...that has suffocated the mission of the Church." Fascinating. That makes me wonder who it is that he thinks should not be included in the dispensation of God's grace. His answer would doubtless be something about 'the unrepentant' for whatever it is that he believes sinful. That is more about culture wars than about gospel. It seems to me that indiscriminate inclusivity is exactly the right response to the Great Commandment. The chapters on community in our new holiness code would doubtless say something about boundaries that define that into which we

are included in God's grace and even something about how those boundaries change, particularly in respect to how we treat each other as one group or another jockeys for power by making claims about the Bible or Church Tradition. But 'indiscriminate inclusivity' seems a pretty good starting point for holy people. And you shall be holy as the Lord your God is holy, loving your neighbor as yourself.

The third section that I would include in a new holiness code, or set of demands that express how we can decide to be faithful to the commands to love God and each other, would be about generosity, service and self-giving. The third section would be about stewardship and making real the effects of the gospel in our lives. It is in giving that we receive; in service that we find freedom; and in dying that we have life. I would want us to make commitments about how we give of ourselves in love. (and Tim or Beth Frilingos will be reminding us of a crucial way to do that in a few minutes.) I would include ways in which we make commitments to generosity with our money and with our time as specific ways of being holy and so fulfilling the Great Commandment of love.

What would you include in a holiness code—a way of being specific in response to God saying "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" and "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. And more than that: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

As ever I invite you to continue your response to the gospel in a time of silent prayer. What commitments do you have or need to make about attending worship, making space for others not yet here, and about your giving of yourself? Let us pray...