

FEBRUARY 19TH, 2017: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18 I Corinthians 3:16-23 Matthew 5:38-48

Just what do our sacred authors mean when they refer to someone as being “holy?” They certainly aren’t employing a Merriam-Webster definition of the term. In their minds it normally has nothing to do with being “revered or worthy of devotion.” A holy person or object is simply “other:” there isn’t anyone or anything quite like it. That, for instance, is the main reason Jews were forbidden to make images of Yahweh. Any picture, bas-relief, or statue of such a completely holy individual would be limiting his/her otherness, something Yahweh’s followers were expected to respect.

That’s why the Leviticus author must have deeply disturbed his readers when he not only reminds them that Yahweh’s holy, but, through Moses, also tells them to imitate that holiness. They’re to accomplish this not by dressing different from everyone else, but by living lives that are other from people around them, lives based on a unique value system. Against common wisdom and practice, they’re to “take no revenge, cherish no grudges,” and, unbelievably, “love their neighbors as themselves.”

Matthew’s Jesus simply points out a few implications of such holiness in today’s gospel pericope. His followers are not only expected to “turn the other cheek” when someone strikes them, they’re even required to “offer no resistance to one who is evil.” He consistently wants them to show “hesed” to everyone.

Biblical hesed refers to what an individual does for someone which goes beyond what he or she has a right to expect. It’s a way of exercising freedom in situations in which one’s freedom has been taken away. For instance, though someone might have a right to “go to law with you over your tunic,” handing over your cloak to that person is a totally free act. In the same way, going two miles instead of one mile for someone forcing you to do so, is also a free action. There’s “no charge” for that second mile.

As a good Jew, Matthew’s Jesus is convinced that one way we demonstrate our holiness is by freely doing things which we have no responsibility or obligation to do. A significant part of our otherness is that we’re free even in situations in which others have surrendered their freedom. Just as our “perfect” God freely deals with people, so do we. Those who want to be like God are expected to act like God.

It’s significant to recall that even though main-stream Jews had huge difficulties with the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, Christian Jews didn’t seem to take its demise on the same level. We have to thank Paul for their reaction.

Though the Apostle was martyred about 10 years before the Roman army leveled Jerusalem, the theology he develops in today’s I Corinthians passage certainly provided them with a unique perspective from which to view that national and religious disaster. No longer was the Jerusalem temple the only place where Jesus’ Jewish disciples could encounter God. “Do you not know,” Paul asks his Corinthian readers, “that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Then he reminds them of the obvious: “The temple of God, which you are, is holy.”

If acting like everyone else is the norm of wisdom, it’s no wonder, Paul argues, that people judge other Christs to be fools.

We know from movies like Jeremiah Johnson that many Native American tribes gave their mentally ill members a free pass, interpreting their unconventional actions as signs they were close to their gods, who they logically reasoned would act differently from themselves.

I wonder how many of our friends and relatives are just as generous in judging our holy actions?

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FEBRUARY 26TH, 2017: EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:14-15 I Corinthians 4:1-5 Matthew 6:24-34

I was part of a prison retreat team some years ago, when I noticed a handwritten poster on one of the conference room's walls. It carried a simple message: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I, God, will never forget you." One of the residents had obviously been deeply moved by today's Deutero-Isaiah passage.

This unnamed 6th century BCE prophet confronted many difficulties during his Babylonian ministry. One of the most serious revolved around the captives' belief they'd been deserted by Yahweh. They had good reason to come to that conclusion: they and their families had been in Babylon for over 50 years. Any hope of returning to Israel had disappeared years ago. Besides, at that point in salvation history, most Jews believed Yahweh – like all other gods – was territorial. He was God only in Israel. Take one step across the country's border and you had to deal with another country's gods and goddesses. Why trust a God who was helpless in Babylon?

But since Deutero-Isaiah was a proponent of the novel theology that Yahweh was the one and only God, he was certain Yahweh was just as powerful in downtown Babylon as he was in downtown Jerusalem. He was convinced Yahweh was more one with the captive Israelites languishing in a foreign land than a mother with the child at her breast.

Five hundred years later, Jesus of Nazareth confronted a similar problem. As we know from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, he demanded some radical morality from his followers. They were to treat others in completely unique forgiving and loving ways. Anyone who dared follow his radical lead logically feared God would leave them in the lurch. After they generously gave everything of themselves to those around them, what would happen to them? That seems to be why Matthew's Jesus spends so much time assuring them of God's care and concern.

He tries to convince them not to worry about what they'll eat, drink or wear. They're not to fudge on their imitation of him. "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides." In other words, when you begin to notice God acting effectively in your lives, you'll also begin to notice God taking care of those lives. "Don't worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself." Commit yourself to living day by day.

Paul takes us even deeper into God's care. In today's I Corinthians passage he reflects on questions about his own ministry, not certain whether he's failed or succeeded in what the risen Jesus has called him to do. As a "steward of the ministries of God," he can only keep trying to be trustworthy in carrying out his mission. He constantly works at truthfully sharing God's plan with those around him, no matter the results or consequences.

The Apostle doesn't seem to be losing any sleep at night, second-guessing what he's done or hasn't done. He's convinced only the risen Jesus can make such a judgment, and he/she's not expected to do that until the Parousia.

I presume one of the reasons Paul doesn't worry about success or failure is because, as he once told the Galatians, he's experienced the risen Jesus. And that encounter originally took place while he was still a sinner – a persecutor of Jesus' disciples. If the risen Jesus was caring for him while he was in that state, then he/she must be near to and concerned for him and all of us on a level that goes far beyond even the love of our parents.

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