

Proper 25A 2020  
Lev. 19, Matt 22

God's Holiness is Our Holiness  
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Imagine watching your rival sports team being soundly defeated by an unexpected competitor. Now imagine turning around and challenging the winner. How confident would you have to be to do this?

In today's Gospel reading, the Pharisees hear that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. And they immediately gathered together to outwit Jesus. They must have been pretty confident. Even though they witnessed the sound silencing of the Sadducees, they only saw this as evidence of their superiority to the Sadducees. They might have thought, "Those Sadducees are soft from their privileged life--the wealth and protection they get from being in cahoots with Rome. We Pharisees are the people's people. We're not blue bloods--we work for what we get. We're scholars. We study Torah and we practice Torah. The Sadducees are imbeciles and deserve to be dominated for their lack of intelligence. We might not have riches, but we are smart!"

And so one of them, an expert in the law, asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment in the Torah?"

Jesus answered from the *shema* in Deuteronomy: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind."

This answer surprised no one. This was a worthy first place contender among the laws. The lawyer might have been ready to move onto another, tougher question. But Jesus wasn't done. "The second is just as important. Love your neighbor as yourself."

Whoa! That was unexpected. That law was one of many that was written in Leviticus. Important, but equal with the commandment from the *shema*? That couldn't be right. Or, could it? This was a new twist. The lawyer might have puzzled, "But who is my neighbor?" Is the neighbor a member of my tribe? Maybe even a member of my nation? Jesus in the Gospel of Luke used this puzzlement to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. Imagine what the lawyer would be thinking, "A good Samaritan! What a preposterous idea. There are no good Samaritans, as there are no good Herodians and Sadducees! They are all traitors, enemies!" Imagine maybe one of the Pharisees had been at the Sermon on the Mount and remembers Jesus saying, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemies. But I say, 'Love your enemies and pray for them.'" Could it be that Jesus meant that the neighbor can be my enemy! You mean it could be these Sadducees! They are on the other side!

For us today, can you imagine a political party or group "on the other side" that you can love as much as you love God? Or, as God loves you? Or, as you love yourself?

We read today from Leviticus:

*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

*You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.*

*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

Which one of these is the easiest? Which one is the hardest? At our vestry meeting on Tuesday, one member exclaimed, “You’d have to be God to do all this!”

No truer words have been spoken. This is the crux of the human condition: God is thoroughly loving, but we are not. And yet, God says we are to be holy as God is holy. How do we become like God in love and holiness?

This is where Jesus comes to help us. Jesus invites us to imitate him in the way that he forgives, in his self-denial, in his willingness to love even those who will do him the most harm. Jesus knows that if we continue to imitate each other, we are lost. That is because, no matter how good we are, we end up comparing ourselves with each other, competing with each other, and doing violence upon one another. Rivalry and violence has no place in Godly love. The truth is we cannot look to one another as the means to freedom from our human condition. Human history has shown we can’t figure out a way to peace that doesn’t end up using violent means. This was the problem with the Pax Romana, which used violence to keep the peace. But, it only perpetuated violence. When the Pharisees and Sadducees were duking it out with each other over Rome and power, they were caught endlessly in a struggle that dealt in violence. Three days from this point in Matthew, we will see where all this will go. The religious leaders will become violent beyond their imagination. As good, religious folks, they will be screaming for the crucifixion of Jesus.

The amazing thing, the gospel thing is that even as they screamed for his blood, Jesus continued to show them the way to freedom by forgiving them, even on the cross. Jesus was giving them a way out of their soul’s death march. The offer was renewed when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended--so that this offer of forgiveness can be taken up from all time and place by all people.

We talk much today about our divisions. We have been trying to master our divisions by mastering the other. Even if our opinions and actions are for what is right, the ways we go about making things right seem to put us back into the cycle

of rivalry and derision. It really begins to seem hopeless. How do we escape the cycle of rivalry and violence?

Jesus says, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and you will find rest for your souls." Elsewhere Jesus says, "Whoever wants to become my followers, must imitate me--they must pick up their own cross." The way out is live as forgiven people. That is, as sinners among sinners, all in need of grace. And even as we work toward doing what is good and right, we do not get lost in hatred of those who differ from us. We look to Jesus and imitate him--in the way he forgives his enemies even when they hurt him.

It's not about us being good enough. Rather, it is only God who is good and it is God's goodness that makes us holy. When we see one another through God's holiness, we see our neighbor with the same love that we see God loving us. We cannot be holy by looking at each other. We only get caught up again in the old rivalry. But, we look to God and let God's holiness be our holiness. We look to Jesus, who did not come to abolish the law, but to show us how to fulfill it by imitating him who made equal love of God and love of neighbor. Then, we can fulfill the commandment, "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy."