

Salvation's Way of Life

There's something unusual, or perhaps even novel, about today's sermon. It's unusual for me, the preacher, for sure. And it's likely unusual for you, the listener.

What I'm talking about is that this sermon is based on a scripture passage from the Hebrew Bible book of Leviticus. I'm guessing that many of you would be hard-pressed to recall a sermon from this book. And I can assure you that this just might be the first sermon that I've ever preached on from this book—and that's after 32 years in the ministry.

Why is it that this book gets short shrift? After all it's part of what's called the Pentateuch—the 5 books of Moses at the very beginning of the Bible. The 5 being: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. A lot of attention is given to Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy—but not so much to Leviticus and Numbers. In fact, in the lectionary cycle in which 4 Bible passages are assigned to each Sunday over the course of a 3-year period, this is the only Sunday that anything at all is assigned from the book of Leviticus—and on some years when Easter comes early, we skip right over this Sunday. And then what's more, the pastor gets to choose what will be the sermon focus text; and I guess I never got around to choosing this one, because, well, it's from Leviticus.

Leviticus is that book that has all those rules, many of which are considered to be bizarre in today's world. Here are just a few:

- According to Leviticus, a man's worth—in “dedicating a person to the LORD”—is 50 shekels. A woman, however, is only worth 30. (Lev. 27:1-4).
- Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. (Lev. 19:19)
- You shall not round the corners of your heads. (Lev. 19:27)

And then there are those bizarre dietary laws contained in Leviticus:

- Eating an animal which doesn't both chew cud and has a divided hoof (cf: camel, rabbit, pig) is prohibited (Lev. 11:4-7) [“You will be unclean.”]
- Eating – or touching the carcass of – any seafood without fins or scales is prohibited (Lev. 11:10-12)
- Eating – or touching the carcass of – flying insects with four legs, unless those legs are jointed is prohibited (Lev. 11:20-22)

Perhaps it's in part due to these rules and laws that are clearly for a different time and context that we can be quick to overlook much or all of the rest of this book. This is unfortunate though, because Leviticus records more words from the mouth of God than any other book in the Bible. I think it's a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water when all of Leviticus is then basically ignored.

When we get hung up on some of the details, we can lose sight of the big picture—a big picture that I would argue is a message as much for today as it ever has been. As contemporary readers of Leviticus today, “one central concern involves the oft-repeated injunction [by God]: ‘Be holy, for I am

holy.” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Book of Leviticus,” *The New Interpreters’s Bible*, Vol. 1, ©1994 Abingdon Press, p. 985)

One Bible scholar sums up Leviticus in this way. “The book is given to Israel so that the people might live holy lives in fellowship with a holy God. But that intent does not tell the whole story, for a greater purpose is also served in furnishing Israel with laws that secure their well-being: They are to be a blessing to the nations. . . . the Levitical laws are intended to train, teach, and prepare the people to be Gods’ instruments of grace to others.” (*ibid.* pp. 987-988)

One of the themes that we encounter often as we consider the overall message of the Bible has to do with human behavior. Specifically it has to do with the behavior of the people of God. Now it probably goes without saying that as God’s people we’re to behave well. We’re to live upright lives that honor God and that in turn honor one another as well as ourselves. Jesus himself summed it up perfectly when he said that all of God’s commands can be summarized in love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. That was Jesus, recorded in the New Testament, quoting words that are found again and again in the Old Testament, including a quote from Leviticus 19:18. This summary is as old as the Bible is old.

While this summary of God’s commands is seemingly simple and straightforward, we have the tendency to get hung up on what is our motivation for fulfilling God’s commands to love God and neighbor and self. Or in the case of Leviticus, our motivation for living holy lives.

Do we fulfill God’s commands for living holy lives so that God will look favorably on us and accept us? Does our fulfillment of God’s commands for holy living lead then to our salvation?

Or, is our fulfillment of God’s commands for holy living a response to or result of our salvation by God?

One of the biggest misunderstandings of God’s law as we read it in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), given to the people of God, beginning with Moses, is that it was given as a roadmap of sorts—a roadmap that leads to salvation—fulfill all 613 laws and you will be saved. We contrast that roadmap with the roadmap to salvation that Jesus lays out—namely that acceptance of God’s grace, given in Jesus, puts us right with God.

But let’s listen again to what we read in Leviticus today. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. . . .” (Lev. 19:1-2)

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. The instruction that follows such as leaving some of your harvest for the poor, not stealing or dealing falsely, not lying, not defrauding, not making it difficult for the disabled, and so on are all pointing to behaviors of those who have been made holy by God. Holy living is the result of being made holy.

It’s not the other way around. It’s not live holy so that you will be made holy. No. It’s live holy because you are holy.

Here in the book of Leviticus, of all places—that book that is filled with all those obscure rules and regulations, we’re hearing a message of grace—a message of God’s action that precedes our action. In Old Testament terms: live holy *because* you’re holy. In New Testament terms: live good and faithful lives *because* you have been saved. In both cases, how we’re to live *follows* God’s grace.

When we accept this grace, when we accept that we have been saved, when we accept that we are made holy, our living becomes grace-filled, love-filled, and gratitude-filled. It enables us to move from fear-based motivation to love-based motivation. No longer are we living in fear of God not finding us worthy. We move to living with gratitude that God has already saved us and made us holy.

This living with grace and gratitude is a characteristic of many of the great world religions in addition to Christianity and Judaism. Finding the good in one another and wanting to share that grace and gratitude with others can be seen demonstrated around the world.

This was shown last week in California. As you have heard in the news, many parts of northern California are experiencing record rainfall after the recent severe drought years. All of this extra water is putting stress and strain on water managers. The Oroville Dam on the Feather River, the tallest dam in the country, has been filling to near capacity for the first time in years. The spillway that is designed to deal with record water levels is damaged to the point that there is fear that a breach could result in severe flooding downstream. So dangerous is the situation that many downstream communities such as Yuba City were evacuated for a time. Many of those evacuated ended up in Sacramento with no place to stay.

An article on Valentine's Day appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* online, tells the story of the Sikh religious community's response of hospitality and welcome.

As tens of thousands fled low-lying regions on the Feather River this week amid warnings of flooding from the rapidly filling Lake Oroville, Sikh temples across the Sacramento area opened their doors to evacuees. "This is their home," said Singh [one of the local Sikh priests] of this week's visitors. "Our faith teaches us to help everyone. The poor, the hungry, it doesn't matter who you are." Sikhs in Sacramento, home to 10 temples and about 11,000 Sikh families, began putting out calls for supplies and volunteers on Sunday evening after 180,000 people living in communities downstream of Lake Oroville were given short notice for mandatory evacuations. "Our temples — all temples — always have a rule of having an open-door policy to house and feed anybody. That's one of the most important teachings of our guru," said Raj Kumar Sood, a truck driver who is the temple's board secretary. "But we've never seen a crowd like this." So on top of the usual industrial-size batches of rice, lentils, cauliflower and spinach volunteers cook for the prayerful each week, community members have chipped in to add some American flare to their offers. A Sikh who runs a pizza shop closed it on Monday, directing his staff to make vegetarian pies, spaghetti and macaroni and cheese to donate to the temple. Variety packs of chips sat alongside stacks of bottled water in a dining hall. Cans of Dr Pepper were plentiful.

www.latimes.com/nation/la-me-sikh-temples-oroville-evacuees-2017-story.html

Sikhism is the 9th largest religion in the world, with 25-28 million adherents worldwide. It is a monotheistic religion that affirms one God. About a half million live in the US and half of them live in California. Sikh teaching emphasizes the principle of equality of all humans and rejects discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, and gender. Sikh principles encourage living life as a householder.

What an inspiration to the world they have been in this case last week in California as they have elsewhere over the years. May we, as God's Christian people be so inspired in our holy living to be those who also show and demonstrate the grace and holiness of God through our living grace-filled and holy lives.