

Sermon by the Rev. Leah Lonsbury
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48

So, wow... this is my week to preach, huh?

In Leviticus, Moses goes to Mt. Sinai to receive God's word for the people of Israel. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes to the mount and delivers his word to his followers. In the Madison-area this week, I have been to the capitol, and I too have a word for you. And that word is we should begin with prayer. Please pray with me...

Holy One, be in this place, in my words, in our thoughts and hearts. Move us in your generous love. Stretch us, challenge us, gift us with your wisdom that we might be holy as you are holy. Amen.

This has been a week of more for me. More people than I could have imagined gathered in one place in Madison. More funny quips on protest signs than I could ever have conjured up myself. More thoughtless and offensive slogans on protest signs than I expected. More mixing of colors, vocations, economic situations, ages, political persuasions, religious or non-religious leanings, and life situations in the people I rubbed shoulders with on the square than I might have guessed. More to learn about what the Governor is proposing and what it will mean for my family and the people of Wisconsin. More discussion about collective bargaining and the rights, benefits, and wages of public workers in our state. More fact-checking and reading about politics, legislation, and motives than I (embarrassingly) usually do in 6 month's time. More time with a wild kindergartner in my house than I really enjoyed due to the teacher sick-out. More. More. More.

More also seems to be the theme that emerges for me from our texts for this week. They're saying to us, live more generously than you think you can with loved ones *and* with strangers. Deal more honestly and truthfully with the people you encounter than you imagine is possible. Move through this world with more careful feet, more gentle hands, more observant eyes, and a more cautious tongue. Be more impartial and just. Make your heart more reconciling, and do more confronting of sin in yourself and others. Be more forgiving and more apt to walk away than to strike back. Oh yeah, and love more. That means more than just the people you already love. Love your neighbor who voted for Scott Walker. Love your kid's teacher who called in sick. Love the Democrat senators who left the state. Love the Governor too. Find somewhere deep inside yourself more love for those who wrong you, disagree with you, lie to you, infuriate you, and disappoint you. And love yourself too. And God. More.

O.k., so Scott Walker's name doesn't really show up in the Bible, not even in Leviticus. I found a lot of interesting stuff in there, but no mention of our governor. What I did discover in my studies this week is that there seems to be no expiration

date on God's call to more. God sent it down from Sinai with Moses. Jesus spoke it to his disciples during the Sermon on the Mount. It finds us here today as well.

Moses is speaking to God's chosen people. Jesus is preaching to the choir, aka the disciples. And here I am, sharing these words with the good people of Memorial UCC. The Israelites, the disciples, this crowd here today... we've shown up. We're listening. We bring our children to Sunday School. We bake cookies for funerals. We give to those in need. Kelly Jetzer was here yesterday at 9am for the Council Retreat, at 2pm for Loma's memorial service, and again at 7pm to run The Night of Music. She's here at 8:15am today to worship and will stay to teach Sunday school at 10. Shouldn't at least Kelly be let off the more hook? Let's consult Leviticus and Matthew... nope. Sorry, Kelly. And that goes for the rest of us good church folks here, I'm afraid.

If the word "more" is starting to wear you already busy and over-committed people out like it is me, let's try a different one. But, you might not like this word any better. It might seem intimidating or impossible or reserved for only the saints, but let's give it a shot... holy. These two texts are issuing God's call to the people of Israel, to the disciples on the mount, and to God's people today to be more, to be holy. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," says Leviticus.

I don't know about you, but this word makes me a little uncomfortable when it's aimed at me. It seems reasonable for God to be holy, but, as theologian Kimberly Clayton says, "...we have a pretty good sense that most of us are not holy—or holy enough... In fact, our discomfort on the matter has become a commonly understood expression of disdain, 'holier than thou.' ...most of us think true holiness is reserved for a few exceptional people of faith." Mother Teresa comes to mind. Dr. King does. Ghandi. Dorothy Day. The Dalai Lama. Phil Haslanger.

This modesty may seem appropriate to our good Midwestern sensibilities, but it can also be a way of letting ourselves off the holiness hook. And that, my friends, is not biblical. God says to Moses, "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." All. Everyone. That means Kelly Jetzer. That means me. That means you. Sorry friends, you are on the hook for being holy. Being holy is what any person created in God's image is called to be. Or, maybe the better term is "do."

In Leviticus and Matthew, holiness is not characterized by some ethereal state of being, but by how we act in everyday places and relationships (Clayton). Leviticus says holiness is leaving some of your harvest behind so that the hungry do not go to bed with empty stomachs. See? While it can be, it's not always about pious prayers or grand sacrifices. It's about not stealing what belongs to someone else or telling a lie, even when it seems harmless. Holiness means being a just employer—paying someone fairly and on time for the work that they have done. It's not making life more difficult for someone who is already suffering or standing idly by when a neighbor is in trouble. According to Leviticus, you are holy when you bite a

gossiping tongue, choose not to spread slander, and when you let go of that grudge you've been holding. You're holy when you are fair to *all* God's children equally, without being influenced by greed or pity. All these examples could have marched right off the capitol square this week, but they also come straight from our lectionary reading for today.

For God's people in Moses' time, for God's people in this time, in this place, being holy isn't the key to salvation, it's salvation's way of life. God has already brought God's chosen people out of Egypt. They are already delivered. God has claimed us in the same way, brought us here together. So there they are. Here we are. Now what? Holiness. It's how we build the community of neighborly love that always seems to be on the forefront of God's mind and sometimes so far from our reality. Our text from Leviticus gives us some pretty specific guidelines for getting down to the holy work of community building love. And so does Jesus in today's text, right?

Well, right, but leave it to Jesus to go just far enough with those guidelines to send us back into the "I'll just leave that holiness stuff to the Mother Teresas of the world" spiral. Why must Jesus' words always chafe? Turn the other cheek? Give my coat as well as my shirt? Walk another mile? Give to *anyone* who begs? Be perfect? Really?

I have this friend in Atlanta who reminds me a lot of Jesus. It's not just because he's a bearded man who wears sandals a lot. It's because he's always taking things a bit too far. We'll call him Howie. We would often be sitting around the dinner table together with a group of friends, having a fantastic time, talking about our lives and laughing, and then Howie would interject something that would have the effect of a needle scratching across a record. And then there was silence. When we had recovered from the often inappropriate, extreme, quasi-offensive, and/or off-colored bomb he had dropped on us, someone would always say, "Howie, you saw that line, and you just stepped right over it. Didn't you?"

I imagine Jesus to be a little bit like this.

The thing with Howie is that yes, his comments would have offended my grandmother, but there was always something underneath them that started us thinking when he stopped our conversation. You see, Howie is also the holiest atheist I know. He became disturbed with the ways animals are treated in the meat processing industry and... poof! Instant vegetarian. He saw how the school he was teaching at was under-serving African-American young men and started a "Men of Distinction" club so he could walk with and devote extra attention to his students on a more personal level. He rides his bike on the traffic-packed roads of Atlanta to and from work to do what I would call protecting God's good creation. He would say "to reduce my carbon footprint." He protests regularly at the School of the Americas and keeps my inbox busy with articles I MUST READ NOW and petitions that need my URGENT ACTION. He's one of those e-mail shouters who seem to have a permanent caps lock and a strong affinity for exclamation points. He's the busiest and most outspoken activist I know, and he's read far more on Christian ethics and

theology than I ever have. There is something within him that is always pushing against systems that uphold inequality or brutality or hatred. I'm convinced that something is some serious holiness. His words chafe, but like Jesus, he's after something with his line crossing.

You know when Jesus starts with, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." that he's up to something. But first, here's a disclaimer. The more Jesus is advocating for in this passage is not more pacifism or cooperation in the face of abuse or oppression. He is not saying that African-Americans should be fine with continuing disparities in high school graduation or incarceration rates. He's not saying that women who make less money than men in the same job should be silent. He's not saying that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks in committed relationships should settle for less than equal marriage rights. He's not saying laborers should be silent when their rights to speak for their well-being and the well-being of those they serve are at risk or when they are denied the right to come to the table. These are not just my words or opinion. They resonate with our faith and our faith tradition. This week, the WI Conference of the United Church of Christ called the right to negotiate "an essential framework of a democratic society and . . . consistent with the moral and ethical principles that come out of our Christian faith." O.k., disclaimer over.

So what *is* Jesus saying? What kind of holiness or more is he calling us to with these teachings that coax us beyond our normal response, our chosen boundaries, or the capabilities we think we possess? Jesus' line crossing, his chafing words are meant to shake us loose from our need to strike back, our gut reaction to leads us to retaliation, and our flight to insulated self-protection and self-interest. He's speaking against the stuff of my disclaimer—passivity or cooperation in situations of abuse. And he's also speaking against action that preserves and protects one at the cost of harm done to another. He's saying, "You have heard it said... but I say to you... things must be different with you if you're going to follow me."

He's putting us on the holiness hook by calling us to what Ghandi and Dr. King and many of those holy saints I mentioned earlier have called active non-retaliation. Matthew Boulton describes it this way, "[Jesus is calling us to] a stance so far from resistance to opponents that at first it seems to border on collaborating with them, offering them another cheek, another coat, another mile. But upon closer inspection, this stance is actually rooted in a profound resistance, an unexpected refusal to play the opponent's adversarial game. By voluntarily going a second mile, for example, the first mile is likewise refigured from something 'forced' into something chosen; so what might superficially seem to be docility is actually, at a deeper level, a form of non-adversarial defiance."

Ghandi liked Jesus' "turn the other cheek" teaching for just this reason. He wrote about how it influenced his non-violent strategy towards independence from British occupiers. Dr. King and the civil rights movement he represented put active non-

retaliation to work in Birmingham and in other segregated cities through boycotts and sit-ins and marches.

Jesus teaches his disciples that opposing an opponent is yet another act of opposition. The true reversal of tides comes with a creative response that works toward extinguishing not the opponent, but rather the opposition itself. Resisting the aggression being done instead of the aggressor undermines standing paradigms of hostility. And when opposition and aggression and hostility are washed away, there is ample room for conversation and understanding and that love stuff that Jesus is always talking about. It makes room for more and holiness and the community of neighborly love.

Remember Howie and his unorthodox and off-color push against systems that uphold inequality or brutality or hatred? This is the stuff of creative enemy-loving, aggression (not aggressor) busting, and the perfect living that Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. For the word “perfect” in our text can be interpreted as “complete,” “whole,” or “mature.” Leave it to my friend, the holy atheist to achieve perfection Jesus-style.

This subversive holiness requires more generous love we are accustomed to dealing out to those who oppose us. It requires more than we think we are able or willing to sacrifice. It means compromising more than we are comfortable with and hoping more than feels safe. And, it depends on a more committed creativity than we think we are capable of for the building of a community of real, neighborly love, a community of wholeness, of perfection in completeness.

Good news, holy friends. We aren't left alone to do the work of more. We are empowered to love by God who is love and who first loved us. Barbara Essex, whose books we have studied here together in adult ed says of this, “We are able to be gracious, forgiving, hospitable, and generous because we are children of the God who showers us with abundant grace, mercy, love, and protection. Those who know God's love now can love their enemies; those who experience God's forgiveness now can forgive those who persecute them; those who claim God's gift of generosity can now give back to those who have little or nothing. We are able to do these things because in Jesus we live in the days of God's reign.”

That's more good news, holy friends. We are not left without an example of how to make this work in our often messy human realm. Jesus has got that one covered for us.

One more bit of good news, holy friends. We don't have to initiate or build the community of neighborly love from the ground up. It is already present and moving ahead. We see it in the healing and reconciling love Jesus shares. We spy it in the generosity and hospitality of this community of faith. I glimpsed it yesterday when a union plumber struck up a friendly conversation with a man wearing a hat covered in tea bags on the capitol lawn. It is made clear when paradigms of abuse and

oppression are traded in for the holiness of equality that recognizes and honors the worth of all God's children. It surprises us in line-crossing and off-color ways from holy atheists and other saints.

I have been to the capitol, and I have a final word for you. That word is that we should end with prayer. This has been a week, and there are more tense and anxious times ahead of us in the days to come. So let us offer ourselves in prayer that we might be the "more," the holiness that God is calling us to be for the need that surrounds us and the building of the community of love right here in the state of Wisconsin. We'll hold silence, and I'll close us with the words of Rev. Dave Moyer, our WI Conference Minister for the UCC.

"In a time of conflict and danger for his community, the prophet Isaiah offered [this] invitation from God to the people: 'Come, let us reason together.'"

In the spirit of God's invitation through Isaiah, "we all lift special prayers this [morning] for our state and for all who are involved in this important moment in our public life. Our prayers go out to families wondering about their future, to state workers, legislators, our governor, union leaders, and all of us as citizens. [We] pray that our churches may be a source of healing and may offer hope grounded in a God of justice and compassion who gifts us with the reason that can provide a just, fair, and respectful way through our common problems."

We lift these prayers with vulnerable and hopeful hearts in the name of the one who came that we might be one in Love, Jesus the Christ. Amen.