

**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, February 19, 2017**

**Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin**

**The Rev. Canon Patrick P. Augustine, D.Min. DD., Rector**

**Leviticus 19: 1, 2, 9-18, 1 Corinthians 3: 10, 11, 16-23, Psalm 119: 33-40, Matthew 5: 38-48**

### **What does it mean to be Holy?**

*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."*

I always find it hard for me to think myself holy. It is easy for me to say that I am a sinner in need of God's grace. Every time I approach the Holy Altar to celebrate Holy Communion at the time of ablution. I say a prayer while I wash my hands, "Holy God, have mercy on me a sinner. Wash me with the blood of Christ to make me whole and holy to stand worthily in the presence of Holy God. Have mercy on me a sinner." What do you think it means to be holy?" Would you consider it a compliment or insult if somebody called you holy?

In popular culture the word holy is used in different ways. For example if you find somebody is exhibiting spiritual tendencies you may call that person a Holy Roller, or a Holy Joe, or holier than thou. It all depends in what context one is labeling, as it can be an insult or compliment. Many times the church leaders with honorable titles, and televangelists with passionate altar calls who are portraying holier than thou have failed terribly to live up to the mark. In spite of our human failings we still are called by God to strive to be holy as the psalmist prays:

*Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.*  
(Ps.119: 33)

Or St. Paul writing a letter to the church in Corinth reminds them:

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

*... For God's Temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:16-18)*

As Christians we have no choice except to work towards this goal to become holy people of God. Holiness is the central attribute of God. You may notice that in the Scriptures this is the only attribute of God mentioned in triplicate. No other attribute of God for example is God mentioned more than once. Holiness is mentioned in Isaiah:

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. (Is. 6: 3)*

Revelation 4: 8:

*Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to be come. (Rev. 4:8)*

Somebody has said, "Think about that for a moment. If God says something about his character once, that's enough to settle it. When he says it twice, that's emphasis. But when he says it three times, that means it's of supreme importance. Being holy is what makes God God!"

In the book of Leviticus we read today the code of Holiness. In order to understand what is holy or what does holiness mean we will dig into its Hebrew roots. The word "holy" is in Hebrew "*kadosh*". There is an interesting fact that the word for a harlot in Hebrew is "*kadasha*" and the word for holiness is "*kadusha*". This is a difficult thing to understand. How can the same letters (which in Hebrew convey similar meanings) be used for such completely opposite meanings - holiness and prostitution?

But the concept can be understood simply as a "*kadasha*" a woman who is living without the bounds of the normal worldly conveniences of marriage. She lives without regard to the worldly laws of conduct. Her conduct is in effect oblivious to the normal rules and boundaries. Her life is not bounded.

God also lives without bounds. On one side of the picture, he is the infinite, totally without beginning and without end. He existed before the world existed and will exist after the world ceases to exist. This means that God, the infinite, certainly can fill the world and at the same time not be contained by the world. This is a bit of a dichotomy, He is actively involved in the running of the world, yet, totally

unaffected by the world - and yet our prayers God hears and answers!! That is Holiness!<sup>1</sup>

This is also our holiness to live out in the world. We are God's holy temple to impact and affect the world to make it a holy place. For example in our baptismal covenant we say that we shall strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being (BCP 305). Then Jesus says you are holy rollers to work opposite to the law of retaliation ( *lex talionis* found in Exodus 21 and Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19) and be advocates of non- retaliation and, therefore, against any brute policy of "Eye for an eye." Turn retaliation into non adversarial defiance against revenge. Mohandas Gandhi thought highly of Jesus teachings on the new code of holiness. It influenced his nonviolent strategy against the British colonial occupation in India. Such response to the law of retaliation is a creative response that works toward extinguishing not the opponent, but rather opposition itself.<sup>2</sup>

Let me give an example how we may practice holiness in our lives. Last Thursday morning a young family rang bell to come inside our church building. Jackie and Susan Miller welcomed this young mother with three little children and her husband and fed them breakfast in the Augustine welcome center. Later, they joined us for a very delicious lunch Jake Delwiche had prepared. Family met with me after lunch. They needed two days of stay in a motel. They were staying at Salvation Army where it was not safe environment for young children to stay. Salvation Army recently changed their rules to allow drunk to come inside their building during the cold season. I was able to help them to stay at Motel 6 from the funds you provide for Rector's discretionary fund.

That is what it means, living and practicing the holiness of God. An Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes it as the practice of "wearing our skin"

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<sup>1</sup> Avi Lazerson, *from the January 2001 Edition Jewish Magazine*

<sup>2</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.1. Pp. 380-385.*

which means to be incarnational people in our world. She says, “Wearing my skin is not a solitary practice, but one that brings me into communion with all those other embodied souls. It is what we have most in common with one another.”<sup>3</sup>

The glory of the holiness of God is best discerned in God’s presence in our hearts. The cloud of the glory of God’s holiness present among us is the way we live our lives and practice our faith by “loving our neighbor.” “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect (paraphrase be holy), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (paraphrase holy) (Matthew 5:48).

I hope and pray that like Susan Miller, Jake Delwiche we shall “Wear our skin” and practice holiness in our daily lives.

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

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *From An Altar in the World*, p. 45)