

Epiphany 7A, Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, 23 February 2014

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

S.D.G.

From the first chapter of Genesis we remember the words: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them,” (Gen 1:27-28a)

On the sixth day it was very good. Yes, it was very good right up to that time when humankind messed up, and boy did we mess up. Just look around at the world and you can see the implications. But all along, God blesses us and calls us to be like him. And even while we have a fixation on original sin there it is in Genesis, the original blessing.

There is a saying that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I don't think that is true, it just takes a lot longer. And we have been at it for a long time, we keep trying to learn to be like God; to be like how we were created, created in God's image.

Today we hear from the third book of the Bible; Leviticus is full of do's and don'ts, all told the Pentateuch, the first five books, has about 613 different rules to follow. Even in this short section of Leviticus there are quite a few “you shall not” rules; most of which are really ways to show respect for our neighbors. Many of these should sound familiar to you, they are spelled out in the Decalogue and the Ten Commandments; a foundation to our faith that is so important as to be posted behind the altar of the Historic Chapel, and found in many other worship spaces.

Among the many “you shall not” rules that we heard today are three admonitions of “you shall”. The first is “you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” Genesis tells us that we were created in the image of God, God is holy, we are also called to be holy. This is our quest, our challenge. At a time when many people just want to fit in and not be seen as different, this can be a stumbling block. To be holy is to be sanctified; it is to be set apart from the secular, from the ordinary. Being holy is to live with fidelity to God. Being holy entails living for, with, and through God.

The second “you shall” admonition is “you shall fear your God”, this is not exactly what we want to hear. Fear has a very negative connotation to us. I have recently read two different views of this use of fear, however I don’t think that these views are mutually exclusive. Like much of God’s world it may not be an ‘either / or’ but rather a ‘both / and’ scenario. The first discussion delved into the fear that we have when faced with seeing God and realizing how we have become very much unlike God. We started as created in God’s image and blessed by God; but through our own devices and desires we have strayed from this, we have hidden the reality of God and taken upon ourselves our own image, an image that is not of God. This fear is the shock we will experience when we see just how far we have drifted away. And the fear encompasses the realization that we will be immediately embraced by God’s love, despite our own failures.

The second view of the “fear of God” concerns the linguistics of the early translations. The specific word that we now translate as “fear” would have related to the love that a son or daughter has towards a loving father. It reflected an effort to not disappoint or let the loving father down. The word used related to a fear of not pleasing, it was not about a fear of punishment. Remember that God blessed us when he created us.

Another way to look at the “fear” associated with God brings us back to teaching old, and young, dogs new tricks. I saw a cartoon recently with two dogs greeting each other, the one dogs says “Hello, my name is ‘No Down Dog’.” I do not profess to being a good dog trainer, a simple visit to our home will reveal that fact when you are greeted by our furry terror. However you can see in well trained dogs whether they were trained out of fear or out of love. Looking at their eyes, ears, and tail will tell the story; do they perform a task because they fear punishment, or do they not want to disappoint their human partner?

Before continuing let me step aside for a moment and give you a nugget to wrestle with during Lent. Is your God a toxic, fear inducing, punishing God? Or is your God a loving God who gave the original blessing when we were created? Wrestle with that and in time we can see what you discover.

The final “you shall” admonition in Leviticus today is “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We find this same statement in all four Gospels, it is one of the core foundations of our faith. In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we read in

Matthew today, Jesus ups the ante. Not only are we to love our neighbor, but we are to love our enemies as well. We are to pray for our enemies; I am confident that that does not include praying for a disaster or plague to strike them down, rather we are to pray for their wellbeing and blessings.

If we are to be like God, then we must love like God - perfectly and inclusively. As Matthew tells us, we are to greet not just our brothers and sisters, but the stranger as well.

In Seattle Washington there is an architect who did just that, greet the stranger. Three years ago while riding his bike to work, Rex Hohlbein, stopped as he rode past a man sleeping outside. Taping him on the shoulder Rex said that when he woke up he could come by his office for a cup of coffee and use of the bathroom. As Rex got to know this gentleman he learned that Chiaka was an artist and had been on the street for about 10 years. Rex offered to store his artwork and allow him to sleep in the shed beside his office.

The next step that Rex took was to create a Facebook page to promote Chiaka's artwork. Through this page Chiaka and his family in Pittsburgh were reunited. Their lives had been changed forever.

Rex's architecture office now contains piles of donated clothing and food for the many homeless who come by to use the bathroom and share a cup of coffee. Rex's design work is now part-time and his work with the homeless is full-time. He is also working on designing affordable micro-community transitional housing for the homeless. He photographs his friends that live on the street; the photos show unique individuals all of whom were created and blessed by God.

Individuals who remind us to be holy, to fear the LORD our God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Individuals who remind us why we should leave some of our harvest and our grapes to share with the poor and the alien. Individuals whose lives touch ours giving us the opportunity so that we can try to love like God and try to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. To be holy, because we are blessed.

Amen,