

Love and Limits

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

August 2, 2009

Ezekiel 36:22-32 NIV

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

“‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!’”

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask you and we urge in the Lord Jesus that, just as you learned from us how you ought to live to please God (which is how you are living) — that you should do so more and more. You know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

This is God’s will, that you become holy: that you keep away from fornication; that each one of you knows to get a sexual partner for yourself in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God, so that no one goes too far and exploits a brother or sister in this way, because the Lord brings punishment for all these things, just as we told you before and warned you. God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness. Whoever rejects this, then, rejects not a person, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

No one needs to write to you about mutual love, because you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to do so more and more, to aim for a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, just as we instructed you, so that you may live in a way proper to outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Sermon

I said in a sermon some time ago that the word *righteous* had fallen on hard times. That the word is rarely used in a positive way these days. That usually it stands in for *self-righteous*. I think the word *holy* has suffered a similar fate, similar but not identical. We still meet the word in the Bible and in church songs. We might even use the word in our prayers, especially if the prayers have been written out first. But *holy* is not an everyday word, not by a long shot. And when it is used, it tends to be a put-down. To say that Corrine is “so holy” is not a compliment. It means that Corrine is too good for the rest of us, even if she doesn’t think so herself. If you have a reputation for being “holy,” you probably won’t get invited to many parties, except by people who want to bring you down a notch or two.

I wonder if the word *holy* can be rehabilitated. I wonder if holiness can sit comfortably in the 21st century. And if it can’t, I wonder if it has sat comfortably in any century. That’s no an academic question. It’s

at the center of discipleship, of Christian vocation. “God’s will,” Paul told the church in Thessalonica, “is that you become holy.” God’s will for you and for me, and for us together, is no different.

So, then, what is holiness? What is holiness about? *Holiness* is one of those words in the Bible with a multi-layered meaning. God is holy. Angels are holy, some of them. People are holy, some of them. Places are holy: buildings, mountains, camp sites, some of them. Words are holy, some of them. Sacrifices and offerings are holy, some of them. Now I don’t imagine that all these are holy in just the same way. I would suppose that the holiness of God and the holiness of a side of beef are somehow different.

For today, let’s think about just one characteristic of holiness: holiness makes distinctions. Here’s how it works. Holiness makes distinctions, distinguishing one thing from another, then chooses the one and not the other. God chose Abram, not Lot. God chose Jacob, not Esau. God chose Israel, not Egypt. God chose David and none of his brothers. (Do you know these stories? You need to know these stories!) God chose Israel and instructed Israel to be holy, to be holy the same way that God is holy. So Israel made distinctions, choosing one thing and not another. Mutton and not pork. Fish and not clams. Wine and not blood.

The obvious question is, why the one thing and not the other? Why Jacob and not Esau? Why Israel and not Egypt? Why chicken and not rabbit, even though rabbit tastes “just like chicken”? Often the answer is quite simple: Because. Because. God said to Israel, “I chose you because I chose you.” Or “I chose you because I love you, and I love you because I chose to.” Sometimes there’s more to the answer.

Israel was to choose one food and not another for reasons, some clear, some not. Choosing one food and not another was a way to be like God, a way to remember every day with every choice that God had chosen Israel. Choosing one food and not another was also a way to remember that some things are right, some not. Sheep and cows and fish and chickens measured up to expectations for their general class of animal. Pigs and rabbits fell short. (“Why?” is a subject for another day!) These expectations were arbitrary, but they kept Israel mindful of God’s expectations for them, for his people. And those expectations, arbitrary or not, served the missional purpose of God’s holiness.

God chose Israel, no other nation. That choice made Israel holy. For Israel, holiness was a matter of identity. It was also a matter of vocation. Israel’s imitation of God, by making its own choices and by being a unique people who reflected God to the world, God’s justice, mercy, and faithfulness — Israel’s imitation of God revealed the holiness of God to every people, as did Israel’s very existence as a people uniquely blessed, so that, through Israel, the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled and all peoples would be blessed, blessed by turning away from everything false and turning toward the true and holy God.

In the middle of the 1st century, Paul reminded the church in Thessalonica about the holiness of its identity and vocation. Those 1st century Christians had been “called in holiness” and “given the Holy Spirit.” In other words, God had chosen them, which gave them a holy identity. And God had sealed that choice by giving the Spirit to them. The Spirit that created trusting faith in their hearts. The Spirit that had begun to transform them. And this was their vocation: to be transformed, to become through their behavior what they already were by God’s choice. To become what they already were. A born musician is only a musician when she takes up her instrument and begins to play.

The Christians in Thessalonica were on the road to becoming virtuosos. The clearest evidence of this — I’ve mentioned it every week, because Paul keeps coming back to it — is their mutual love. In an exemplary way, they went far beyond the habits of their culture. Their love for one another bridged social, cultural, and religious distinctions. This was a key countercultural marker of the first Christians. Rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile — they loved one another and expressed that love concretely, no matter how they were messing with time-honored distinctions.

But they were not virtuosos yet. They were still on the road. So Paul instructed them and warned them concerning, in particular, proper sexual behavior. It was a matter of making distinctions. Demosthenes described the distinctions in classical Greco-Roman culture this way: mistresses for pleasure, prostitutes for sex, and wives to bear and tend legitimate heirs. Paul wrote to encourage, to require, a different set of distinctions. He invoked notions of holiness and honor and mutual respect. Holiness would mean, like God, choosing one partner and not another, one partner and not several, and being faithful to that one partner in marriage, just as God chose Israel alone and kept the promises of his covenant with Israel.

This behavior — and this is only one example of holiness in action — was for its own sake. It was right and good. That was enough. But it also had a larger, missional purpose. Not just sexual behavior, but also mutual love, and also peaceable and decorous lives and honest work — these would bear witness to outsiders of the unique and virtuous community that was being formed in their midst by the Holy Spirit of God. The conduct and character of those Christians would reflect poorly or well on their Christ.

With all the forgoing in mind, I wonder what our holiness might look like in these days. As in the 1st century, our holiness in the 21st century incorporates our sexual behavior. But, of course, there's much more to holiness, to our holiness, than that. Holiness is all about our identity and our vocation. And before we think about how we are to behave, we need to come to grips with who we are.

Here's how that works. By the mysterious action of God, which sometimes looks utterly ordinary and sometimes amazingly extraordinary — by the mysterious action of God, we find ourselves to be part of the church: claimed by God in baptism, nurtured by God through the Word and at the Table, gathered like the dust of the earth to form a body, and made alive by the breath of God.

Yes, the church looks nothing more than ordinary. There are church buildings on every block, congregations in every neighborhood. We are not unusual in the least. And yet the church is the church, not a social club, because God calls us, gathers us, and sends us. Even if it all looks and feels ordinary to us, God is, in fact, the one who brings the church into existence and who brings us to the church, which is to say that we are holy, a holy work of God. That is our identity. We need to come to grips with that.

And then there's our vocation. Our vocation in Christ is complex. But it at least includes this: making distinctions, making distinctions between one thing and another and then choosing what's right and good. Of course, these days we like to think of ourselves as sophisticated. We know that life is more about shades of gray than about black and white. We know how complex every situation is. We know how difficult it is to chart a clear path.

Jan and I watched the movie *Revolutionary Road* a few days ago. Frank and April Wheeler were an amazing couple. They were the best. Their friends and neighbors could tell. But their marriage was falling apart. Individually and together, their lives were in pieces. And there was no clear way to put everything back together, no obvious black and white path that would make everything right. Yet some things were obvious. Some things were black and white. Frank's adulterous relationship, his "fornication," wasn't good at all, not for him, not for April, not for their marriage, and not for the "other woman." And April's brief, adulterous romp was just as bad. There was nothing gray about it.

Some of you are old enough to remember half-tone images in newspapers. Those images, photographs, were printed in multiple shades of gray, covering the entire range from white to black, sort of like the gray that makes up life, the gray of the choices we face. Yet a half-tone image is actually entirely black and white. There are no grays at all, only larger and smaller areas of black versus areas of white. Look closely and you can see the black and white dots and spaces. But from a distance it's all gray.

My suspicion is that an awful lot that is called a "gray area" these days is actually black and white. It's like Micah 6. The question there is, "What should I bring to the Lord? Burnt offerings? Calves? Rams? Olive oil? My own child? It's all so gray!" But the answer is "He has shown you! Don't pretend that you don't know. Don't confuse the issue with complications. He has shown you! Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

So, what has God shown us? What distinctions, what choices are we to make in our vocation to follow Jesus? Some, maybe most, of the choices are quite ordinary, mostly about being decent human beings.

Love one another.

Love you husband. Love your wife. Be faithful.

And love one another.

Enjoy sex, but keep it within a covenant commitment.

And love one another.

Be a good neighbor and a better friend.

And love one another.

Be honest and fair, whether you're making a business deal or playing a game.

And love one another.

Don't try to run other people's lives, but do try to keep your own life in order.
And love one another.
Don't shy away from difficult decisions or from hard work.
And love one another.
Do your best.
Trust God.
And love one another.
Be grateful for every day and for every blessing.
And love one another.

That's some of it. And it all has a missional purpose. God always wants others to see, to notice, to be impressed by his holy people. A people who are holy not just in name, but also in behavior — that makes God look good. And it encourages others to wonder about this sometimes strange people called the church. And it encourages them to wonder even about God and to praise him. Which is an important part of why God calls us and makes us holy.