

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

[It's a tall order](#), don't you think? This business of being the people of God.....this business of being a Christian. Different things are required of us. Different things are expected of us. And some of them are very hard to do. Many of them are in direct conflict with our human instincts. And yet we are charged with going against those instincts in service to the God we love and worship. We are perpetually charged with going the extra mile.....with doing and saying more than is required in the larger world in which we live. And we are asked to walk this extra mile because everything we do and everything we say gives others a glimpse of the God of love that we profess to worship and follow. And it's not just about actions. It's also about our attitude. [That's a tall order.](#)

Every three years, we get to hear a scripture passage from the book of Leviticus and this is the ONLY passage from Leviticus that we ever hear in our Lectionary Cycle, so it's probably important that we pay attention. The book of Leviticus contains all the instructions for how the chosen people of God are to worship, how they are to atone for their sins, and how they are to treat one another. It was given to the chosen people while they were in the wilderness. Leviticus is the third book of the Old Testament and as such it is the very middle book of the Jewish Torah which comprises the first five books of the Bible.....Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers. The passage we heard this morning is exactly in the middle of this middle book of the Torah. And as they say in real estate.....it's all about location, location, location. This central portion of Leviticus that we heard this morning is known as the Holiness Code and it's important. These are the instructions to the chosen people of God about how they are to behave as the chosen people of God: Don't clear all your fields when you harvest. Leave some of your grain at the edges of your field and your fallen grapes on the ground so the

poor and the alien can have something to eat. There is no mention here of whether or not the poor and the alien are worthy. Don't steal or defraud and don't lie to each other. Pay the people who work for you on time. Don't make life more difficult for the handicapped. Treat people impartially regardless of wealth, status or power. Don't swear by God's name. Don't gossip or slander people. Don't hate anyone in your family. Don't bear grudges or seek vengeance, but love your neighbor as yourself. *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.....*and you are my children.

That's a tall order! How in the world are we going to be 'holy' just because God is 'holy'? And what does it look like for us to be 'holy'? We love God. We worship God. We are God's people, but we can't be 'holy'! Or can we? Holiness, according to Leviticus, is in the choices we make about our daily lives. It's not about being sequestered or removed from society. It's not about piety. It's not about spending all our time in worshipping God. It is in knowing that how we behave in the ordinariness of life reflects on our Father in heaven and is itself a form of worship of God. There is a connection between our relationship with God and our relationships with the people in our lives.

We hear the same thing this morning from Jesus in a slightly different fashion in the gospel of Matthew. He has said he has come to fulfill the law, not to replace the law. He provides us with a deeper understanding of the laws of God. Jesus refers to the laws in the Old Testament, but he challenges us to go a bit farther in understanding not just the letter of the law, but the meaning behind the law. And he shows us a better way. He shows us a way that is more powerful than the law that has been given. Jesus says to us, "Don't strike back!".....as in 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' If someone hits you, turn the other cheek. Believe it or not, that's a shift in the power differential between two people. If you don't hit back, you are being uncooperative in the game that the aggressor has just stated. If you don't hit back, you aren't playing that game. If you don't hit back, you are also demonstrating that you won't.....and can't.....be provoked into taking action that you don't want to take. That is a powerful position to take. In effect, Jesus is saying, don't return bad behavior in kind. Don't fight fire with fire.

Fight fire with water. Fight fire with something different.....with God's love. It's human instinct to want to fight back. We want to protect ourselves. Jesus is asking us to override our human instincts for something even more important.....demonstrating the characteristics of the God we love. [That's a tall order!](#)

Every student of nonviolent protest will tell you that the first and most powerful element of the process is the refusal to play the aggressor's game. Mahatma Gandhi observed that if we were all to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth eventually everyone would be blind and toothless! Dr. Martin Luther King taught all of us the power of not returning violence with violence, but with non-violent protest.....refusing to strike back. He taught us not to return hate with hate, but to return hate with love and with kindness. In the process of teaching all these things, they both died. Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated at 79, but he freed an oppressed nation from colonial rule. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at 39, but he showed an entire nation the inequalities and injustice in its midst...and how far we are from being God's people. Following the path that Jesus laid out for us is not only not easy. Sometimes it's just plain dangerous. [It's a tall order.](#)

Jesus points out to us that we are to love our enemies as well as our neighbors. That's not easy, but if we love only the people who are easy to love or the ones who love us, what qualities of God are we demonstrating for people? Even the tax collectors can love the people who are easy to love. God asks us to model what God models.....to love everyone.....the good and the bad alike. As Jesus points out, that's what God does.....he sends the sunshine to both the evil and the good and the rains to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. And then Jesus ends by saying much the same thing that Leviticus says when we are told to *"Be holy, for the Lord your God is holy."* Jesus tells us to *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* [That's a tall order.](#)

How can we possibly be perfect? We know that we aren't and we can't be 'perfect.' So what is Jesus telling us about what we are supposed to do and be in order to be the true children of our

heavenly Father? We are to try.....always. We are to never give up. When we fall short, we are to get up and try again. We are to pray to be changed ourselves to be more in the image of the God who has made us. In our daily lives, in the choices that we make, in the ears we use to listen, in the arms we use to hug and support, in the smile we give to the one who needs love, in the care we take of others.....we try always. Even when it's a tall order. Especially when it's a tall order. We will fall. We will, with God's help, get up. We will try again. It is in the persistence.....in the trying.....in the constant, prayerful and daily striving.....that we are perfected by God.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.