Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. E. Gary Taylor

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, Amen.

You shall be holy, God says, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. Holy? Me? I think I've told you before that one of the biggest obstacles that prevented me from going to seminary to pursue ordination as a priest until I was in my forties was that I assumed a person aspiring for holy orders had to be that, holy.

And heaven knew I wasn't even close. I'm here before you today because of two things that eventually helped me get over that obstacle. The first was that I had a number of friends and acquaintances who had pursued ordination, people I knew well enough to know that they were not what I thought of as holy, and yet they made pretty good priests.

And I thought, well, if they can do it. The second took longer because it required me to reconsider something that I thought I understood, what holiness actually means and where it begins. Some trusted mentors helped me to see that something about God and about myself that eventually gave me the courage to go to seminary.

And I think that that is what is at the heart of our readings this morning. I suspect I'm hardly alone in finding God's invitation to holiness both beautiful and unsettling. Beautiful because it invites us into the very life of God and unsettling because we all know too much about ourselves to imagine that we belong there.

We know the things we have done and the things we have left undone, the distance between the people we hope to be and the people who actually emerge when we are tired or frightened or feeling underappreciated. And yet God's invitation is addressed to precisely such people, to you, to me, to all of us who hear these words

and wonder whether God could possibly mean us. Holiness is not something that's talked about much these days.

The Hebrew word for holy, kadosh, most essentially means set apart for God. And the command we hear from Leviticus today, kadoshim tahyu, is plural. God is addressing a whole people, calling them to a shared life apart from the ordinary, a different way of living than the rest of humanity, one that reflects the character of the God to whom they belong.

Now I'll venture that not many of us have read the entirety of Leviticus. It's filled with mind-numbing instructions about sacrifices and food and ritual purity that seem archaic and irrelevant today. That's probably why Leviticus is almost never designated as one of the readings in our Episcopal lectionary.

In fact, this passage is the only passage included, and this only twice in our three-year cycle. But beneath all those details in Leviticus lies a question that is as urgent now as it ever was. What does it mean to be God's people? What is to give us our identity, shape our priorities, determine how we live with one another? In the biblical story, these are people whom God has brought out of the slavery in Egypt, people learning how to live in freedom and how to become a community.

They're wandering around the desert, and Moses is struggling mightily to keep them together, to identify and remind them what makes them a nation, a people. It's no accident that that is when and where the commandments are given to them. The way they are to live their lives bears witness to the God who has delivered them and most fully tells them who they are.

Notice how practical holiness becomes in the passage we heard this morning. Judge fairly. Do not slander.

Do not hate your neighbor in your heart. Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge. Love your neighbor as yourself.

We begin with the holiness of God, and before we know it, we're talking about what we say about someone when they're out of the room, whether we treat people fairly, and what we do with the resentment we've been carrying around for years. Apparently, these things belong together, God's holiness and the fabric of our lives. Which brings us to the gospel.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, teaching in the shadow of the cross, facing questions from religious leaders who are testing his authority and seeking to expose some weakness in his understanding of the law. These are serious people asking serious questions, although their intentions toward him are hardly friendly, and one of them, a lawyer, asks the question that brings us to the heart of the matter. Teacher, which commandment is the greatest? Let's linger a moment before Jesus answers.

There are so many commandments, so many obligations, so many competing claims upon a faithful person's attention, and here is someone asking Jesus to tell us what belongs at the center, what everything else is supposed to serve. It's the question we all want to ask God in our best moments. What does matter most? What should I build my life around? What is real holiness? Jesus answers from Deuteronomy, from the words at the heart of the Jewish faith contained in a prayer called the Shema, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

And then, without waiting for another question, Jesus adds the words we've already heard from Leviticus, love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The Greek word translated here as hangs is chromeatai, a word with a very physical meaning elsewhere in the New Testament, a millstone hanging around a neck, a snake hanging from Paul's hand, a body hanging on a cross.

Here Jesus uses it to tell us that the whole weight of the law and the prophets depends upon these two commandments, that everything God has been teaching God's people about how to live finds its coherence and purpose in loving God and loving neighbor. Which means that however carefully we observe the rules, however carefully we defend the faith, however faithfully we come to church, we

must keep asking ourselves whether these things are helping us to love. Because love is what holds the whole thing together.

And there's a connection here we mustn't miss. Elsewhere in the New Testament this is the same verb that describes Jesus hanging on the cross. The love upon which all the commandments hang will become very visible in the one who hangs there, giving himself for the very people he has commanded us to love.

On this love hangs the commandment, love your neighbor as yourself. We've heard love your neighbor as yourself so many times it kind of feels stale, but let's take a second to pay particular attention to the last two words of that commandment, as yourself. We tend to hurry past those words, perhaps because we assume that loving ourselves is something we already do quite adequately, perhaps excessively, and that the real work of religion is to get us to think about somebody else, and certainly that is sometimes true.

But sometimes the person sitting quietly in the pew, looking perfectly capable and respectable, carrying out responsibilities and taking care of everyone else, is living with a very different conviction deep inside, that somehow they're inadequate, disappointing, fundamentally unworthy of love, and certainly not holy. Some of us learn those messages very early, from words spoken by people whose judgment mattered enormously to us, or from affection that always seemed to depend upon achievement or obedience or being the person someone else needed us to be. Some of us acquire them through failure or rejection, through experiences that left us confused about what happened to us and who we are.

And when those messages have been repeated often enough, they can begin to sound like the truth. So we work harder, we strive to become more useful, we try to be indispensable, hoping that if we can finally do enough, accomplish enough, give enough, we might earn the right to feel that we are enough. And into that exhausting bargain comes the grace of God.

If there's anything that's at the root of the message of Jesus, it is this. You are beloved. Before the accomplishment, before the improvement, before you have managed to put your life in order, you are beloved.

You are God's. You are holy. This is one of the most important convictions we work to instill in every child at Trinity School, because whatever else children learn with us, whatever knowledge or skills they acquire, more important than all that is that they come to know that their worth rests upon something deeper and more enduring than a grade or a victory or somebody else's approval.

Each child is a beloved child of God. And like the prodigal son, nothing they can do, nothing that happens can change the powerful truth that they are loved. They are holy.

That conviction gives children a secure place from which to accept responsibility, because a child who knows that making a mistake does not make them worthless can begin to acknowledge the mistake, repair the harm, and try again. And what's true for the children is true for us. We can face all the truths about ourselves more honestly when we trust that the truth will not cost us God's love.

And that's grace, the most powerful force in the universe. The love of God, reaching into the places where shame has taken hold, challenging the verdicts that we've accepted about ourselves, giving us the courage to believe that we are worth loving, and the freedom to become more than we've been, giving the courage to do something hard and important, not to earn God's love, but because of it, convincing us that we don't have to somehow become holy enough, because thanks to grace, we already are. The love we receive from God strengthens us to do whatever God calls us to do.

I'm not saying that your call is to ordain ministry like mine was, but I'm as certain as I am of anything in all creation that Jesus is calling each of us to some form of ministry in His name. Calling us to love with the generosity of someone who's already received everything that matters. To love with the patience of someone who's received forgiveness.

To love our neighbor, the easy one and the difficult one, the one we cherish and the one we'd rather avoid, remembering that the grace which holds us, you are holy. You are made in the image of God and marked as Christ's own forever. Love as you're loved.

Imagine what the world would be if we all did that.