

“You Shall Be Holy, for I am Holy”

Meditation on Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 & 33-34 & Matt. 5:38-48

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Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD....When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. **(Lev. 19, selected verses)**

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 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, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. **(Matt 5:38-48)**

I struck up a conversation with a gentleman sitting next to me at our presbytery meeting last December. We were on a mid-morning break and like most Presbyterians gathered at Good Shepherd in Melbourne, we were eating! The conversation started with how we shouldn't be eating so many sweets!

The man was the Rev. Dr. Lucas de Paiva Pina, pastor of Cocoa Presbyterian Church. Here he is with his wife, Marta. Lucas was raised in the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. Since his ordination in 1980, he has served Presbyterian churches in Brazil and the United States. He earned a doctor of ministry degree from Columbia Seminary in 2007 and served as Immigrant Ministries Coordinator for three Georgia presbyteries. He has written several books, including *Ministering with the New Immigrants: The Challenges that Mainline Churches Face* and *Church: Finding our Way Again*, published last year.

Lucas talked with me about a teaching English as a Second Language program his congregation is trying to start. When I expressed interest, he handed me his business card and invited me to call him. Two months passed, and still I had not contacted Lucas. Fear of commitment--and over-commitment, perhaps-- held me back.

I kept remembering my experience with Gloria, a native Spanish speaker from Colombia whom I tutored in English for 10 months when Jim and I lived in York, PA. Gloria, who had married an American and lived in the U.S. for a number of years, worked in a factory. Although her children, who took ESL in American public schools, could speak English perfectly, Gloria couldn't speak hardly any English at all. She earned minimum wage, lifting heavy boxes on and off a conveyor belt. She

didn't have a driver's license--you needed English for that in York. She lived a mostly isolated existence, avoiding going to places that would require speaking English. She was embarrassed, convinced she was stupid.

I met with Gloria once a week in a Roman Catholic Church that she attended. Her goal was to improve her English so she could get a better job and earn a living wage. I used a thematic, hands-on approach. When she learned about clothing, I brought a bag of clothing, taking out each item, naming them one by one. Later, I took her to the grocery store and to restaurants to practice her English. On Thanksgiving, our two families gathered around our dining room table and said *The Lord's Prayer* in English and Spanish before we enjoyed our feast. The meal, along with traditional American foods, included a custard *flan* she had made for dessert. Then we began reading children's picture books in English and Spanish, such as *The Jacket I Wear in the Snow*. Her favorite book was *Harry the Dirty Dog* or in Spanish, *Harry, El Perrito Sucio*. She laughed and laughed! Her skills and confidence grew!

But, in the end, I broke her heart when I accepted a call to a Minnesota church in June 2011. For there was no one else helping her but me! If only the ESL program had been hosted by a church, where someone else could have taken my place. I feel, even now, that I failed her, since her English was still not proficient enough for her to get a better job. "You are my **good** teacher!" she said, as we cried and hugged goodbye. "You are my pastor! You are my friend!"

Our lectionary readings today include a passage from the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and from Leviticus. This reading in the 19th chapter of Leviticus comes up only once every 3 years, and since it is always paired with the Beatitudes' reading--when Jesus' commands us to "love your *enemies*"-- the Leviticus reading is often overlooked. And yet, we cannot understand what Jesus means in Matthew 5 when he says, "You have heard it said..." unless you have read this chapter in Leviticus, which is, in fact, an exposition on the *Ten Commandments*. The Lord, speaking through Moses, tells Israel that they *shall be holy, for the Lord their God is holy*. The word "shall" is both a *command* and a *promise*. Israel **SHALL** be holy *because* Israel's God is holy. God's people seek to be like the one whom they worship! God will help us to do His will--when we seek Him! What follows the command to be holy is a description of what one **must do** to live a holy life, just as Jesus in the Beatitudes tells His followers what they must do to be "children of your father in heaven" and to be "perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." To be holy and to be "perfect," as Jesus says, requires treating people with the love and mercy that our gracious Lord has shown us. Praying for those who hate and persecute us instead of seeking vengeance are godly characteristics. "Father, forgive them," Jesus says in Luke 23:34 from the cross as the soldiers cast lots for his clothing. "For they know not what they do."

Here in Leviticus 19 we find the commandment against stealing broadened to include not to deal falsely or defraud one's neighbor, such as holding back payment of a day's wages for a laborer. Holiness requires just and kind treatment of *all people* in the community, including those with special needs, such as the blind and the deaf.

Holiness demands that one never has hate in one's heart for one's kin, which Jesus also talks about in Matthew 5.

What is notable is that the first holiness teaching in Leviticus 19 is about ***giving and caring for the poor and the alien***. Being first in position means that God is emphasizing what is of utmost importance! One cannot be holy unless one is generous and gives to those in need. In biblical times, there were no more needy than the widow, orphan, and "alien." Holiness in this agricultural society demands that the Israelites NOT reap to the very edges of the fields, but, instead, leave some of their crops untouched. They aren't to gather what has fallen on the ground during the harvest, either. Likewise, they are to not strip their vineyards bare, but they must leave fruit on the vines and the ground so the poor and the alien may be fed.

This reminds us of Ruth, the Moabite--the alien widow who came to Bethlehem with Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, when there was famine in Moab. She and Naomi survived because Boaz, a wealthy Israelite landowner, allowed Ruth to glean in his field behind his laborers and keep what she had gleaned. Boaz showed his holiness or righteousness by treating her--the alien-- kindly and giving her even more grain to take home to Naomi than what Ruth had gleaned!

Even those who choose to read Leviticus once every 3 years may miss two of the most significant verses of the chapter as they fall beyond the lectionary excerpt. Verses 33 and 34 provide the *why* for Israel's command to show compassion to aliens and even to *love them as much as they love themselves*--gratitude to God! For the Israelites were once aliens--slaves!-- in the land of Egypt. And God sent Moses to set them

free!

Knowing that I was preaching on God's command to love the aliens in our land as much as we love ourselves stirred me to finally contact Pastor Lucas. I sent him an email yesterday afternoon. He replied right away!

"I am glad that you are still thinking about our ESL," he says. Ten students have contacted the church looking for ESL classes. But they haven't started, yet. "We are still struggling to put the program together," he says. "We are looking for someone who can lead it."

His closing words convicted me of having too little faith--and not trusting that our Holy God, who requires that we be holy **and** promises that we **SHALL** be holy, would help us care for the poor and aliens in our midst--if we seek His wisdom and help!

"Probably," Pastor Lucas says, "we need to pray more."

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we thank you for your command and your promise that we **shall be holy**--as you are our Holy God. Forgive us for not always seeking your help and not desiring to be obedient to your commands. Forgive us for struggling to love our enemies and turn the other cheek, rather than seeking to hurt those who have hurt us. Help us to be kind and gracious, Lord, as you are so kind and gracious to us! By your Spirit, transform us, more and more, into the perfect likeness of Christ so that we may be the Church you want us to be. And Lord, please help Gloria,

wherever she is, so that she never feels stupid or like an outsider. Bless her with all that she needs to provide for herself and her family. Build up her faith. And we ask that you help Pastor Lucas and Cocoa Presbyterian Church as they seek to begin a ministry of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Send more volunteers, including someone to lead the program and train volunteer tutors. Bless the students who come. Show us, Lord, how we might also participate in this ministry and give of ourselves and from our resources so that the aliens among us are cared for and loved as much as we love ourselves. In Christ we pray. Amen.