Sermon
The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 25th, 2026
Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Psalm 1; Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
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"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." This command and reasoning repeat over and over (and over, and over) throughout the rule-and-regulation parade that is Leviticus. God is holy: the Hebrew here means set apart, different, distinct and consecrated. God is not like anything else; God is unique. Therefore, if the Israelites are going to be a people of God; if they are going to dwell in the presence of the God who brought them out of Egypt; then they, too, are going to have to be set apart, different, distinct and consecrated.

"Great," one imagines the Israelites asking. "You're holy, so we have to be holy. How exactly do we do that?" Leviticus is, among other things, the answer to that question. Many of the directives laid out in Leviticus are directed to the priests of ancient Israel. Only a handful of us in this room are priests, and none of us ancient Israelites, so I think that we're off the hook for those. But other directives flow down to us, such as those in today's passage. And so we are asked to judge our neighbors fairly, to not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.

That will look different in different contexts, of course. Some years ago, for instance, I taught night writing classes at Washtenaw Community College. Aside from the obvious case of assigning grades, I also frequently had to adjudicate student requests for exceptions, extensions, adjustments, and other assorted ad-hoc changes to how the course was set up.

Friends, hear my confession: I was an absolute pushover. If you approached me after class, asked to turn in an assignment late, and didn't call me an unkind name, I was going to give you that extension. If you slunk in 15 minutes late with even the vaguest excuse, I was probably not going to mark you tardy. You might say that I was "deferring" to those who were "great" in audacity to come up and ask for things; you might say, rather, that I was "partial" to those who were "poor" in time management. You might rightly point out that this was unfair to the students who worked hard, or that there were probably students who failed because they missed a deadline, didn't ask for an extension, and took the zero. All true, certainly.

But.

I also had students who, over the course of a semester of fumbles and errors, became better students. I had students who missed one deadline and, after a sheepish conversation with me, didn't miss another one. I had students tell me that previous, strict English classes had left them sour toward writing, and

that my laid-back approach had helped sweeten the subject. There were, too, students for whom a more rigorous approach would have been exactly what they needed; I can think of times in my own educational career where strong expectations and a firm syllabus pushed me to do more, to try harder, to prioritize my time differently.

So it seems that this whole business of just and unjust judgements becomes a little bit complex when the rubber hits the road. Fortunately for us, Leviticus gives us the guiding principle, a few lines later: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus repeats this in today's Gospel, calling it the second greatest commandment after loving God. On these two, he declares, hang all of the law and the prophets. Sometimes, what a student most needs, what is most loving for them, is to be let off the hook; sometimes, it's to be left hanging on it.

For if the law and the prophets hang on the commandment to love one another as we love ourselves, then said commandment is a hook. And we might therefore think of the various laws as various coats, jackets, sweaters, and hoodies. Each has its own proper temperature and wind level for wear, and each is hanging upon the hook, ready for use. The hook remains useful even when nothing's on it, and does an excellent job of keeping things up off the floor and unwrinkled. But without the hook, we're going to need to put forth a good deal more effort to keep our clothes folded and organized. Even with that effort, we may still find them wrinkled when the time comes for them.

Over and over again, throughout Leviticus, God tells the people how to be holy: to be different, distinct, set apart, consecrated. And over and over, through both testaments, God tells us that the core of holiness, the central animating force that binds it all together, is love of God and love of neighbor. We come to understand these laws not as a set of commands to be obeyed and, thereby, to earn some favor, but rather the particular examples in time and space of how to do the one and only thing that will draw us closer to God. We come to understand them not as things we do, per se, but as the incarnation of things we are, or have become.

We come to understand them, in the end, not as commands but as promises. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" may be read as both a command of how to be and a promise of what will be: because the Lord our God is holy, we will, through God's help, be holy, too. And on that day, we shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great; we shall not render unjust judgement, or have hate in our heart, or bear grudges or take vengeance. On that day we shall love the Lord our God with all our souls, and all our minds. On that day we shall love our neighbors as ourselves. After all, the Lord our God has said so. What else could possibly happen?

Amen.