

I've been preaching regularly for more than twenty-three years now, and I am pretty certain that I have never preached a single sermon on Leviticus. (Now this being St. Francis, someone is bound to say, "yes you did, back in the fall of 2002...") What I can with certainty is this: I have no memory of having done so, and if I did, no record of it that I can locate!

Leviticus only ever comes up as a choice once every three years. And even then, on this weekend we had an option to read from either Deuteronomy or Leviticus. The reading we did hear, however, pairs nicely with today's gospel reading, reminding us that when Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves that he isn't offering an original thought, but quoting from Leviticus, with which he was apparently much more familiar than most of us.

Leviticus seems legalistic and obsessed with rules: as Christians we are bound to ask what things like dietary laws for keeping kosher have to do with us, who may love scallops wrapped in bacon and have only to answer to our cardiologist about such guilty pleasures, not our pastors or bishops...

When I was a young associate rector in Westport, CT, my job included the responsibility of working with the church school coordinator, a great person named Cathy Sebor. We had a conflict arise when a parent came to Cathy and me to tell us that her first-grade daughter had come home from Sunday School in tears, after one of our volunteer teachers chastised her for having a temporary tattoo—a butterfly—on her hand. She apparently told the little girl that Jesus wouldn't come into her heart if she marked her body in such ways. The teacher was, of course, quoting from Leviticus 19:28, which does in fact seem to prohibit both tattoos and body piercings.

The rector and the church school coordinator somehow both agreed that I was the one who should have that challenging conversation with the teacher. I assure you it was not an easy thing to do. And even after all these years I still feel like it was a lose-lose situation for both of us. The teacher had become involved with some kind of fundamentalist Bible study outside of the parish and was absolutely convinced that she had done nothing wrong; that in fact she was just trying to protect the child by telling her the truth. On the other hand, the rector and Cathy and I were all equally convinced that her theology would leave scars on our young people that would be far more permanent than any temporary tattoo, and that she could therefore not continue to teach. So it wasn't fun...

This is the hardest thing, I think, about the Bible in general and it's especially challenging with Leviticus. What applies and what doesn't? What do we take literally for all times and places, and what changes as the world keeps going round and round? For the record, in addition to prohibiting bacon, scallops, tattoos, and body piercings—Leviticus also makes it pretty clear that you must never consult a palm reader, nor let a cocker spaniel breed with a poodle, nor put on a garment that is 50% cotton and 50% polyester. Nor shall a man lie with a man as with a woman.

All of these things are considered by the narrator to be *toevah*—“abominations” to the Lord. (While that word admittedly sounds pretty harsh in English—like something that will get you sent directly

to hell—in fact *toevah* refers to all those things that the priests understand will make you ritually unclean—things you potentially come into contact with in the world around you. *Toevah* is more like germs that require bacterial soap, than sin.

So what's a nice guy like me doing messing around in Leviticus today? Because I'm genuinely wondering what it means for us to enter into it, as we do with all of Holy Scripture, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it. Is there a Word of the Lord here for us or not?

The Bible isn't monolithic. The Old Testament argues with itself; so does the New Testament! (This is why we get four gospels and not just one.) There are different voices—not unlike the voices in the Church today. Imagine getting a group of Christians together that consists of Episcopalians and Roman Catholics and Pentecostals and Evangelicals. And you ask them all to tell you about Jesus. Hopefully there would be a lot they might have in common. But they'd tell it differently, and their various understandings of what it means to follow Jesus would be diverse. This is, to my mind, a very good thing. I don't think that to be ecumenical we need to all be the same.

One of the things that I love most about the Bible is that in a very similar way, if you learn how to listen to it, you discover that there are different voices and different ideas, different ways of understanding God and God's call. Together these many voices offer us beautiful, but complex, harmonies. One of the tensions in the Old Testament is between the prophets and the priests. Think of Micah, who asks: what does the Lord require of you? He gives the classic prophetic answer to that question: “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) The prophets don't seem to care much about liturgy and are sometimes downright dismissive of it: Amos says that God despises religious festivals; that what God cares about is that justice flow like an ever-flowing stream! Faith is about social justice, the prophets say—and Amos and Micah and Isaiah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist all would say “amen!”

The priests in ancient Israel were the Levites: that is why this book is called Leviticus. It was written as a kind of manual for priests. Only there is a little bit of “Lutheran” theology in Leviticus as well: a belief in the priesthood of *all* believers. While it's written specifically for the priests, *everyone* is supposed to try to be a little bit priestly. A big chunk of Leviticus, from which come all these rules and regulations, came to be known as the Holiness Code.

In sharp contrast to the prophets, for priests everything begins with worship. The priests no doubt care about *more* than good liturgy, and would agree that one's faith needs to be lived in the world. But where the prophets focus on doing social justice, the priests emphasize personal and communal holiness. And that's what we heard today. If you ask the Levites: “what does the Lord God require of you?” they will respond: “*be holy, like God is holy.*”

Holiness, of course, is a loaded word, and we are right to be a little bit suspicious of it. Most of us Episcopalians in particular have very little interest in being accused of being anything close to “holy rollers!” But what the Levites mean by holiness is that God's people are set apart and called to be noticeably different from the dominant culture. Think of the Amish in Pennsylvania. The priests of

ancient Israel imagine Jews as being so obviously different from those around them that the world will have a better idea of who God is by seeing who they are. And so they are called to be holy, so that the world may see something of God's holiness.

Now for this writer, shaped by a particular time and place, there are some rules there that don't seem to make much sense to us. And I, for one, am not interested at all in giving up scallops wrapped in bacon to be more like God or condemning people with tattoos. Jesus himself seemed to challenge some of those rules about what you could eat, or how to keep the Sabbath, in his public ministry and that's part of the backdrop to what is going on in today's gospel. Think of the scribes and Pharisees as people who like Leviticus a lot, and Jesus as more into Micah and Amos. It's not a Jewish-Christian thing; it's a Jewish-Jewish thing!

That said, holiness and justice are not mutually exclusive. The Levites do end up connecting holiness and justice and we heard that connection made today, which I think is the larger point that Jesus is making to the scribes and Pharisees in today's gospel: that holiness isn't just about personal choices, but social commitments and economic justice. So there are also rules in Leviticus that you must not reap to the very edges of your land, because you need to leave the gleanings for the poor. And you must not oppress the alien in your land—legal or illegal. And it is in Leviticus that we find the idea for the Jubilee Year, to which Jesus alludes when he begins his public ministry: this notion that accumulated wealth in the hands of a few is a very dangerous thing. Because economies tend to be tilted toward the rich getting richer and richer, even as the poor get poorer and poorer, the idea of Jubilee is that every fifty years or so all debts are forgiven, and the playing field leveled, and you begin again. (See Leviticus 25) While it's not at all clear how or if this Jubilee ever worked out in practice, it is interesting that the Levites wrestled with these wider economic and social and political issues at least in theory.

Jesus seems to affirm the larger point of a call to be holy when he tells his followers they need to be the light of the world, or the salt of the earth, or leaven that makes the whole loaf rise. *We in the Church are called to be holy as God is holy.* But maybe holiness is discovered less in being "separate" or "pure" than it is in mission. And at the heart of that mission is love of neighbor. Priest and prophet alike agree that "neighbor" includes everyone and Jesus seems to reiterate this point again and again in his public ministry. So we are not asked to keep all of the kosher laws and we can have a cockapoo if we wish. And while it may indeed be "an abomination" to play sports on the Sabbath, God's mercy is nevertheless overflowing—grace still abounds for all of us Sinners.

Even so, we are called to holiness: not a holiness that retreats from this world, but that which is willing to dive more deeply into it—with all of life's ambiguities. There we are called to bear witness to the love of God for all people by loving our neighbor as self. And when we do that, the light does indeed shine in the darkness...