

“At the Corner of Courage and Love”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 20) 2011

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Carlyle Marney used to say, “The church that has not lost its courage will never have to advertise its location.” For nearly forty-three years we have not had to advertise our location because we have not lost our courage. (As an aside, I’m learning that does not mean that we don’t need bring ourselves up to date with other kinds of social media – but that’s another subject.) And you know and I know that sometimes we’re more courageous than others. But from our beginning in April 1968 we have sought to have the courage of our convictions. We believe that in Jesus Christ and his love, God is reconciling humanity, and that the church is the place where we begin to live it out.

This has been our calling from Christ since our beginning: to be a different kind of Baptist church, a different kind of *church* – to have the courage to love.

We’ve done this not as a form of liberal tolerance or political correctness but as a community of disciples seeking to follow Jesus and seeking to embody the new creation, the Way of Christ. And like ripples on a pond, we believe that we are to spread the love of God outward throughout the world around us.

A friend of mine likes to say, “When people ask you the address of your church, say: We’re the church at the corner of Courage and Love.” I like that. Our address is at the corner of Courage and Love.

Our Scripture readings this morning show us what that courage and love look like even though they use “holiness” language. We tend to speak of love or reconciliation or mercy or grace but we rarely speak of holy or holiness. We speak

of our church being loving or courageous but do we ever speak of it being holy? Austin Heights is a holy church? That sounds odd; it sounds antiquated, at best.

So what does being holy mean? What is holiness? What's the difference in being holy and unholy, or to use different words which mean the same thing, what's the difference between the sacred and secular?

A friend sent me a blog which noted a recent article in the New York Times concerning changes in public school cafeterias across the nation raising nutritional standards to fight the problem of childhood obesity: low-fat pizza in New Jersey; french fries in California no longer fried, but baked; sweet tea banned in Alabama. Perhaps you will remember that in Texas parents got the "Safe Cupcake Amendment" passed to protect their kids from the Federal Dept. of Agriculture ban on junk foods in schools, so they could still get cupcakes on their birthday. ("Don't tread on me!") But sweet tea banned in Alabama? The blog was titled, "*Is Nothing Sacred!?!*"

There was another post on a YouTube site that complained, "*For the love of all that is holy, STOP changing video resolution on full screen. As an Australian, with limited bandwidth and a medium speed connection, there is nothing as (frustrating) as clicking the 'full screen' button and have the video start re-buffering from the start again. PLEASE PLEASE stop this, fire and execute those who implemented it.*" I'm sorry, but it seems to me this fellow might be a little confused about the meaning of the word "holy."

He's not the only one. "Holy" is a word that's fallen into disrepute. To misquote a favorite movie, "Holy' is a name no one would self-apply where I come from." It's become an insult: "holier-than-thou." Even an oath "Holy cow!" "Holy moley!" "Holy smoke!" The word has lost all meaning.

In Leviticus, God instructs Moses to tell the people "*You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy*" (Lev 19:2). It's not an imperative; it's a declaration

of fact. This is simply the way it is. And Leviticus goes on to describe holiness as sharing the harvest with the needy, treating laborers fairly, taking care of the earth, establishing equal justice for all, welcoming the immigrant, and loving your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19).

And even though being holy seems so Old Testament, the Apostle Paul reminds us: *“Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple”* (1 Cor. 3:16-17). And in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matt 5:48), which at first blush seems an impossible standard. But the Greek word actually means “total, complete, mature, whole,” all of which are related to holiness. To be perfect because God is perfect? To be holy because God is holy? Sounds like the bar is set pretty high?

The word “holy” in the Hebrew scripture originally referred to a unique quality of God as being “wholly other,” belonging to a distinct reality utterly separate from the human and mundane. Holiness is first of all and above all the exclusive identity of God. God has fixed the boundary between the sacred and the profane and crossing that boundary is not just irreverent, but lethal. Certain objects get “property of God” stamped on them and are moved over from the mundane world into God’s space to be used exclusively for God’s purpose. So altars and candlesticks and even structures like the Ark of the Covenant or the Temple are called holy, too. And once they are set apart for God’s service, they belong to God alone. You don’t pull a chair up to the altar to eat bowl of chili or light your smoke off a temple candle. You don’t mess with God’s property!

Jerusalem was the holy city and the Temple was even more holy inside the city. The outside areas of the Temple were for the Gentiles, and then the next area inside were for Jewish women, then further inward was for Jewish males, then inside that was for the priests, and then in the center, the innermost place of the

Temple, was the Holy of Holies, in which only the high priest could enter and then only on one day a year.

Even today we believe and practice marking off some things and some places as holy or sacred. The place where we bury someone is called sacred ground or consecrated ground. When I put on this robe and this stole, there is a sense that what I do is sacred and holy. It does not mean that I do no wrong or do not make mistakes; it means that I'm in God's service and I'm part of God's property. And you had better believe I'm aware of it! When I put these things on, I take a deep breath and swallow hard. This is serious. This is sacred; it is holy.

In Leviticus the priests are holy, which means they've been moved over the line from the normal human world to be used by God. I wonder if this was in today's world, every priest would all wear t-shirts that say "property of God."

This boundary between holy and profane is clear and absolute and inviolable. Remember the story in 1 Samuel 6 about the time the Ark of the Covenant was being moved from Gibeah up to Jerusalem? They had a big parade. David himself led the marching band, but the oxen shook the cart and this guy Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark. And God struck him dead! Uzzah the Loosah," as we called him in seminary. When he saw that, David decided maybe he didn't want something that dangerous in his city after all, so he led the parade down to the house of Obededom the Gittite and left the ark in his living room. But then Obededom had a bumper crop and the prize bull at the livestock show and won the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, so David decided maybe he wanted something that powerful good up in his city after all. That's the thing about holy in the Hebrew Bible. It's powerfully dangerous, but it's also powerfully good!

God makes the boundary clear and absolute and inviolable! But here's the rest of the biblical story: God expands the boundary! At Mount Sinai God calls all

of Israel, the covenant people, to be a “*kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*” (Ex 19:6), and the same covenant calling is extended to the church in the New Testament: “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Pet 2:9). He’s talking about all of us!

Turns out, this once inviolable barrier between us and God is changed by God! God crosses the line, moves out of the sacred space into our space; God becomes one of us in the Incarnation as God becomes human in Jesus. Eventually, we are called to be carriers of God’s Spirit. The point is, all of us are called to be holy. Boundary removed. God makes no distinction between clergy and laity, male and female, gay and straight, young and old – every person who follows Christ’s call into life is baptized – immersed! – into God’s own space, wholly, totally, entirely placed into God’s use, set apart for God’s service.

We should all wear t-shirts that say “Property of God” or maybe have it tattooed on our foreheads. That is who we are and what we do. Carrying God’s presence everywhere we go, you and I are the vanguard of holiness, advancing the boundary between holy and profane until all the world is God’s space, God’s property, God’s own and only so.

But remember what Leviticus tells us holiness is: “Sharing the harvest with the needy, treating laborers fairly, taking care of the earth, establishing equal justice for all, welcoming the stranger, and loving your neighbor as yourself....” That’s holiness as God defines it. That’s powerfully good. Remember how Jesus expands and shows us more of what holiness is: “Turning the other cheek, give your cloak, go the second mile, love your enemies....”

We tend to reduce holiness to a code of discipline which makes us feel righteous even when we’re not. To be sure, a certain manner of behavior goes with being holy. But it’s not primarily about keeping some list of rules. It’s about your

core identity and sense of self as belonging to God and spreading God's love. It's about seeing the sacredness of every moment, every place, every person. It's about loving God wherever you find God, which is everywhere if you are looking. It's about bringing reverence to all of life, love to every relationship, moving the boundaries until everybody is included. We should not be asking "Is nothing sacred?" but "Is nothing secular?" – and the answer is "no, everything is holy to God."

After the end of World War II a Mennonite volunteered as part of Mennonite Social Services to go to Poland to help rebuild. He lived and worked in a small Polish village where he worked on rebuilding bombed out houses, tended the sick and wounded, cooked and fed the hungry, distributed clothes, and did anything that helped these people recover from years of war and destruction.

After two years, the Mennonite got sick and although they cared for him, he soon died. Since he was not a Catholic, he could not be buried on consecrated Catholic ground in the parish cemetery, so the whole village gathered and the priest buried him just outside the fence separating consecrated ground from unconsecrated ground.

The next morning when the village awoke the fence had been moved and expanded so it included the grave of the Mennonite.

God's holiness is powerfully good; it is loving and inclusive, and it takes courage to live it out and spread it. Our call to be holy means we go into the world to tear down the fences between sacred and profane, us and them, enemy and friend, until all the world is included in the circle of God's space, where the love of Jesus Christ rules.

The corner of courage and love is a holy place.

Amen and amen.

