

Kerry R. Mansir  
October 25, 2020  
Christ Church Gardiner

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be always pleasing to you O God, our strength and our redeemer.

Well friends, we gather here in the sanctuary this morning 32 weeks after last worship service here on March 8<sup>th</sup>. And it is good to be here and good to look out at all of you. Unfortunately, we are not back in our church because the pandemic is over. We know that it is not, and we know that we are still months away from a vaccine that will be widespread enough to protect the vulnerable among us.

We are here because we believe that we have learned enough about the spread of COVID to understand that by wearing masks, maintaining social distance, limiting numbers, and ventilating our church, we can minimize the risk. Even so many folks in our congregation, including some of you watching on Facebook this morning, choose to stay home for your own safety and out of concern for the health of others. And so, we long for the day when we can *all* safely worship together again in this place.

For many of us, this sanctuary feels like a sacred realm. The space impresses upon us a sense of devotion and a desire to worship. But we also know that the sacred realm is everywhere around us and is revealed anytime we are intentional about it. The restrictions required because of the COVID pandemic helped us to understand that truth as we were suddenly shut out of our churches back in March. Many of us discovered that we could create sacred spaces in our own homes. We also found the sacred realm in the great outdoors when we moved our worship to the churchyard this summer. Closed churches did not mean that we needed to be separated from God.

In celebration of our return to church this Sunday, I want us to think about what makes a space holy and what makes us holy. So let's start with those first lines from our reading from Leviticus this morning, "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."

The Book of Leviticus—a book that usually seems strange or just boring and irrelevant to us, is actually all about what is holy, about seeking the sacred amongst the ordinary, and about searching for God in our everyday lives. I think sometimes we forget that accessibility to the holy does not require a church. And who better to remind us of that than the ancient Israelite community that had no temples, no synagogues, and no churches?

The early Israelites did not have one morning a week that they entered into holy space. They made every aspect of life holy as best they could. And we find how they did that in the book of Leviticus, which is the book of instructions for the Levites, Israel's priests who were all descended from the tribe of Levi. The priests were responsible for the

people's worship of God—they were the mediators between God and the people—and Leviticus lays out how the people needed to act in order to be “holy.”

Now holiness is incredibly important to the priestly writers of Leviticus. Not because people needed to be holy to prove themselves worthy of salvation. After all, *personal* salvation was a foreign concept to ancient Israel. Seeking holiness was crucial, because holiness is the primary attribute of God. And in order for a holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy people, there was a certain order that needed to be maintained.

If we only knew of the selection from Leviticus that we heard this morning, we might not realize how varied and extensive the commandments are in this book, pertaining to all aspects of life. Leviticus is rightly concerned with rules about fair judgment and healthy relationships with those in our community like we see in these verses. And of course, the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, along with love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, are the foundation for all the law and the prophets. We heard Jesus reminding the Pharisees of that in this morning's Gospel.

But even as foundational as those law were for the people of Israel, there are a hundred other particular rules in Leviticus and elsewhere in the Bible that sound trivial to our modern ears. Rules for how men should cut their hair and trim their beards when they are grieving. Prohibitions about sowing your field with two different kinds of seed. Warnings not to wear clothing made of both wool and linen. Restrictions on what kind of animals one may eat: only those that chew cud and have a divided hoof—which means cattle and sheep and rabbits are okay, but pigs are not.

And while these rules may sound inconsequential to us, what they mean when taken all together, is that God is in the details of even our everyday, mundane life, and that every aspect of our living matters to God. Leviticus outlines for us what holiness is and how can it be translated into life.

Now that is not to say that every commandment and prohibition found in Leviticus must be obeyed in order for us to seek the holiness that is God. We Christians, along with our Jewish brothers and sisters, must decide which of these rules make sense in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, always asking ourselves how they reflect upon the greatest commandments to love God and love neighbor.

And yet, perhaps teaching that holiness is active, and found in every detail of our lives, reinforces for us, that even the most important of the moral imperatives like love your neighbor as yourself and welcome the stranger, must be seen as not emotional claims, but as required actions. In other words, it is not enough for us to *profess* that we love our neighbors and that we love the strangers in our midst. We must use our wealth like we believe that. We must use our time like we believe that. We must use our voices like we believe that. We must use our votes like we believe that. We must DO something because we seek the holiness of God to be reflected in us.

So even as we celebrate a return to this sacred space, let us not forget that it is us, working to reflect the holiness of God, that makes a place sacred. And that being created in God's image means we are called to act in God's holy ways. Amen.