

Title: What Makes Us Holy?

Summary: Holiness has been described as something very personal. Often it is a set of avoidances. In Old Testament times holiness was sought by avoiding certain foods or contact with unclean things. In early Christian times it was sometimes sought by avoiding physical comforts or thoughts of physical pleasure. But Jesus gave holiness a completely different frame. Teaching that what a person says or how a person treats others is what defiles him while what he touches or eats does not defile him, he explained that holiness comes from positive action rather than personal sacrifice.

Key Scriptures: Leviticus 11:41-45; Romans 14:1-3, 13-15

During Lent, we are looking at the roles Jesus plays in our lives. Today we are going to look at Jesus as "The Holy One of Israel".

When I was in college, the cafeteria was in a separate building in the center of the campus. The dormitories were around the edge so there was a bit of a walk for each meal. On the way to and from the cafeteria, the path branched. Either I could walk straight through another campus building on ground level or I could go around the building which involved going down a long flight of stairs, walking past a number of tennis courts, and then back up steps to ground level again. There I was at the same place as if I had gone through the building. I decided to take the outside path as a small sacrifice, as a small task for God. In the fall when I started the sun was out and the air was clear and this was actually a nice decision. The stairs even gave me a little exercise. But in the winter Pittsburgh gets cold and snowy and windswept. The inside path through the building was warm and well lit and not slippery so my outside path was more sacrificial. In the Spring there would be downpours and again the outside path and wet shoes made me feel I was going an extra step for God. In fact at one point I got into a wrestling match with one of my eating companions over this. He noticed that I never went through the building and asked me why. I explained it was a little vow I had taken for God. He said I was being ridiculous and grabbed me to force me to walk through the building. In the scuffle he cut his lip on his braces and

quit trying. I apologized profusely. He wasn't very receptive to my "I'm so sorry's". So he stomped away through the building. I took the outside route.

What was going on? I was trying in a young way to be holy. To be on God's good side.

Through the ages I have had a lot of company taking this kind of vow. Famous monks and anchoresses have pursued holiness by living in caves or up on stone pillars to separate themselves from the rest of the world. So I had many forerunners. It's just that Jesus was not among them. I mean Jesus didn't abandon me but, even if I was well meaning, I wasn't being holy in the way He wanted.

The idea of holiness began at the time of Abraham, the first person in Judeo-Christian history. Because Abraham was more willing than anyone else, to listen and obey God, God began a relationship with him and kept renewing it generation after generation down to today, 130 generations later.

God's offer to Abraham was to protect him and his offspring until they became a large tribe. What did God ask Abraham and his descendants to do? God asked them to be holy.

That was how holiness began. It was a way to respond to God. Holiness has two pieces to it. One is that we believe and do God's will. That's the love and obedience part. The second is that what we believe and do is set apart, different, and distinguishable from everyone else. That is the visible witness part. My way of walking outside rather than through the warm dry building was an effort to do something a bit difficult and different to witness to God. It just wasn't very helpful to others.

Over the next 50 generations after Abraham, his descendants, tried to define holiness with a growing body of laws. Our first reading is an example. It says, if you want to be holy, "Don't eat bugs." A better known law was a prohibition against eating pork.

Much of the early law was personal and evasive, like my evading a warm walk in the building on my way to the cafeteria. It assumed that personal sacrifice showed one's love of God.

I think of it this way. You've heard of the fight or flight response. When challenged with something you can wade in and fight or evade and flee. Much early law for holiness was to flee from eating certain foods or touching dead bodies or coming to supper with dirty hands or whatever.

By Jesus' time, the men who most promoted and lived by the avoidance laws, in an effort to be holy, were the Pharisees. One group of these were known as the "bruised and battered" Pharisees. This was because they felt seeing a woman would make them not holy. So they would avert their gaze or close their eyes when a woman passed them on the streets and, often enough to get this name, they would trip over something or walk into something and get bruised. All in pursuit of holiness.

Jesus came and completely changed our understanding of how to be holy.

Pastor Joyce has preached that we are holy in this church. She quoted 1 Peter saying, **"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."** We are living stones built into a spiritual dwelling place.

Peter wasn't talking about what we eat. In fact, here is what Jesus said about food in Mark 7:

"¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.' ... (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)"

Jesus went on in Matthew 15, **"¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person"**

Jesus changed our understanding of what makes us holy from personal sacrifices to combating evil like murder in the world. This is a huge difference.

There is another difference. Remember the fight or flight choice. As often as not, Jesus taught us to fight rather than flee. Here is what Jesus prayed for us in His last hours, John 17:14-17:

“I’m not asking that You take [my followers] out of the world but that You guard them from the Evil One. ... Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth.”

Jesus did not pray for us to run away from challenges in this world. Rather we are to fight against what is sinful without becoming sinful ourselves. In other words, don’t avoid the poor. Wade in. Feed and comfort them.

Holiness in both Old and New Testaments is a way of life. To be holy in the way God wants, we have to stick to our thinking and behavior. We can’t say nice things on Sunday and then slander people on Tuesday and say our holy Sunday makes up for our unholy Tuesday. It doesn’t. Confession is how we get free of bad Tuesday.

This is how and why we are a holy people. We believe what Jesus asks us to believe. And we do things in the name of our faith that set us apart. Holiness is more “wade-in” than “stay away”.

I’d like to bring up a possible exception to the wade in and fight rule. It is in our second scripture reading. Here is the key verse in Romans 14: ¹⁵ **“And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don’t let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.”**

To be holy, we need to confront sin and evil. However, we need to realize our own limitations. Something, that is not a problem for one person, may be a stumbling block for another. We do need to avoid something that can ruin us. For example, a recovering alcoholic should not begin a ministry trying to save people in all night bars unless they are really sure they will not begin drinking. A recovering heroin addict should not begin a ministry trying to save people at drug parties. In most cases, men should not begin a ministry trying to save women in houses of ill repute. There are plenty of ways to be holy without taking on something that can overwhelm us with temptation.

With that limitation, we should rejoice in being a holy people led by the Holy One of God. By feeding the hungry, helping the needy, openly expressing our faith, treating one another with love, and gathering into churches, we are being faithful and different in the ways Jesus taught and so, yes, we are a holy people. Thanks be to God.