

"The Holiness Code"

Matthew 22:34-46

October 23, 2005

It's a great line - that line from the Old Testament text for today. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." It is a great line - although it may be a bit troubling. There is not a lot of wiggle room in that statement. We do not have any trouble identifying God as holy - but you and me that is a different matter. And the line does not leave any room for us to be anything short of holy. There is no 'try to be holy' or 'for heaven's sake, be holy on Sunday mornings' or even 'work at being holy'. The statement is definite: YOU SHALL BE HOLY! So how are you doing?

There will be a test following worship this morning to determine your holiness - following the quiz there will be fingerprinting, blood tests and FBI background searches. Are you holy?

Jesus was continuing to face the test questions of the Pharisees as we come to this morning's Gospel text. He is asked about the greatest command of God. It was really a test of holiness because it was understood that holiness came from knowing and keeping the commands of God - and isn't that what we believe? Jesus knew the priorities - He knew which commandment was of the greatest importance. "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength." And Jesus continued: "The second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." - What a good boy - goes beyond the original question and gives the first and second priority.

I often think of friends of mine from Seattle [who's names were Mary and Joseph - a great home to share Christmas dinner with]. The first time I visited in their home, I noted and commented on three pictures that they had hanging by their front door. They shared that they hung those particular pictures there so that every time they went out the door they would be reminded of the priorities they had in their lives. The first picture - the picture on top - the number one priority in their lives - was a very traditional picture of Jesus. What is the first and greatest commandment - Love the Lord your God - number one! The second picture, hanging just below the picture of Jesus, was a picture of their family. "Love the Lord your God - # 1. And 2nd - very much like the first - Love you neighbor / your family" Jesus knew the proper priorities. My friends, Mary and Joseph, knew their priorities - Jesus / God first; family / the neighbor second and the third picture, hanging just below the picture of family the 3rd picture was the Minnesota Vikings.

Are you holy? Do you know what makes for holiness? The Pharisees thought that holiness came from knowing and obeying the law - and especially the most important of

the laws. Of course they were not limiting Jesus to the Ten Commandments when they asked about the greatest commandment. They were probably thinking about all 614 laws that they had identified over the years as the way of holiness. The Old Testament text is part of what is called the "Holiness Code". It contains some of those 'laws' which people were expected to keep if they were going to be holy. They were things like: Don't be unfair or unjust in your judgements

Don't be partial to one person over another

Don't slander / gossip

Don't hate your family - reason with your neighbor

Don't bear a grudge

Love your neighbor as yourself

They are good laws. A person would do well to obey them at all times. Most of them aren't so tough to understand. In fact, they really aren't so very different from the kind of list that you might find in other good reading like a book entitled: "All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten". In that book I found such good advice on holiness as:

Play Fair - share everything

Don't hit people - don't take things that are not yours

Put things back where you found them

clean up your own mess

Say you're sorry when you hurt someone

Wash your hands before eating

Flush

It really is a pretty good holiness code. Many people might say that the author is right and if you live by what you learned in kindergarten you will be holy enough. Of course, the Pharisees would not think so. The full holiness code get pretty detailed when it come to what is acceptable behavior in every area of your life. - - - Are you holy? And if you are holy, what makes you holy?

Are you holy because you have come to church this morning? Are you holy because you keep the commandments? Are you holy because you have done some good deeds? I think of our confirmation class - next week they will stand before us and profess their faith and desire to be confirmed - will it make them holy? We do tend to think that it is all of these

things to go together to determine the degree to which a person is holy or not. It is almost a point system - it is the way the world like to operate. But if you are hoping to 'chalk up' points toward holiness, you will always fall short.

When God spoke to Moses and said, "You shall be holy" it was not based on Moses earning enough points. It was based on his relationship with God. God is holy and walking with God is what we need to be holy. God is holy because He separates Himself from the darkness of the world. Walking with and loving God, we are also separated from that darkness.

I can tell you this - do your best to obey all that the Lord commands - it will be good for you. It will not make you holy but it will be good for you. I can tell you to do all you can to live by everything you learned in kindergarten and again, I am convinced that it would be good for you and your life will be better for it. But it won't make you holy. Holy is God's gift to you as you walk with and love Him. Holy is His washing with forgiveness. Holy is life lived in the love of God.

Set your priorities. First - love God and let that love for God shape your life. As you love God, let that love flow to your neighbors and your family. Don't forget the Vikings on your list. You shall be holy - washed in the forgiving love of God.

AMEN