

Olney Presbyterian Church

7th Sunday after Epiphany

February 19, 2017

Meditation for Worship Preparation

In 1 Corinthians 3: 10-23 Paul speaks of the foundation which has been given to him “according to the grace of God.” The foundation Paul is speaking of is Jesus Christ. When we speak of foundations we understand that as the starting place, the place upon which something is build. We too have received that foundation, and we also have been called to build upon it. As Paul states: Each builder must choose with care how to build on it (v. 10b). Paul also continues the theme of Leviticus 19 by declaring: “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (v.17b). The challenge is how to build according to God’s wisdom and not that of the world.

Prelude *Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God, Lafferty*

In the Epistle selection for today, the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians about buildings and foundations. The foundation is Jesus Christ and those who follow Christ are temples belonging to God and must with care construct their building. The construction laid upon that foundation varies, but the foundation is firm and enduring—a gift of God to us all. Surely reason to proclaim:

This is the day the Lord has made; **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Welcome & Announcements

The psalm chosen by the lectionary for today is another section of Psalm 119. This whole psalm is a hymn of praise for the Torah, but this section addresses the psalmist’s need for what the Torah brings—guidance to ensure a strong relationship with the Lord. Our call to worship this morning comes from this request. **Please stand as you are able** as we indeed come into God’s presence seeking a closer relationship.

*Call to Worship

Psalm 119: 33-40

We come to learn the ways of our God.

Teach us, O Lord, the way of your statutes.

Give us understanding that we may wholeheartedly keep your law.

Lead us in the path of your commandments for they are good.

Turn our hearts to your decrees and away from selfish desires.

In your ways give us life. Confirm to your servants your promises.

Let us worship the one who claims us and is present with us.

When in the presence of the Lord it is only fitting that we should offer praise. Praise to the One who created the heavens and the earth, redeemed them and sustains them even today. Our readings from Scripture today will speak of God's holiness so we lift up our song in praise for the Holy One who is perfect in power, in love and in purity. Hymn #2 in the Christian Praise Hymnal.

*Hymn of Praise

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty

#2, CPH

We can and do rejoice that we are the beloved children of Almighty God, yet when we consider what Paul has written about how we build upon the foundation we have been given, we must face the fact that we are often neither righteous nor holy. Trusting in the abundant mercy and grace given to the repentant we now confess our faults corporately using the prayer of confession in our bulletin.

*Prayer of Confession

Holy God, your law shows us the way of righteousness, but we forsake your commandments. We have not provided for the poor or aided the disabled. We have not been truthful in our daily business; we have been unkind and unjust in our judgment of others. We have sought vengeance against those we call enemies; we have not lived our neighbors as ourselves. Forgive us our sins and create in us sincere repentance. Guide us to seek wisdom from you and not ourselves for you are our refuge and our strength. By the power of your Holy Spirit, free us from the brokenness of this world so we may live as your holy people according to the way of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

*Assurance of Pardon

The grace of God is available to all who repent and put their trust in God. We are, each of us, God's temple. God's Spirit comes and dwells in us creating a holy space. Belonging to Christ, who lifts from us the burdens of guilt and shame for our failures, we may begin to again love ourselves and our neighbors. Rejoice in the freedom and forgiveness given through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Hymn of Response

Have Thine Own Way

#294, v1, CPH

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Thou art the potter, I am the clay!

Mold me and make me after Thy will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Please be seated.

Prayer of Illumination

Holy One, by the power of your Spirit present with us today reveal to us your Word. Open not only our ears for hearing your message, but also our hearts and minds. Grant that we understand your call and claim upon us so that we may become a holy temple built upon the foundation of Christ. It is our hope and prayer the message I bring may be yours and that the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you. This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

It is not often that the book of Leviticus appears in the lectionary texts. Leviticus has few passages that are loved and quoted by Christians, and in fact, we often ignore the entire book. After all, it is full of all those dietary laws and restrictions which served to set the people of Israel apart from those other groups living in the Promised Land which they came to possess. Those things no longer apply to us. The title of the book comes from the name of the Priestly tribe—the Levites, yet the content of the book mentions them by name in only one passage. The majority of the text consists of long discourses by God about how the people are to live—instructions about the practical aspects of daily living. These directions are contained within 36 speeches by God and many of the contain words which do still apply. Hear the message God gave to the whole congregation through Moses as recorded in Leviticus 19: 1-4, 9-18.

Old Testament Reading

Leviticus 19: 1-4; 9-18

P.184, Pew Bible

Musical Interlude

Holy Ground, Davis

Our passage from Matthew continues the readings from the Sermon on the Mount. These teachings again follow the pattern we heard last week..."you have heard it said...but I say to you." as a particular commandment is addressed. Jesus is again offering an interpretation of the Law given to Moses at Sinai which has formed the basis of the tradition; an interpretation concerned more with intent than legal restrictions. Jesus states with authority that the true way to please God is to act with this broader understanding of the intent of the commandments. Living in this way will allow the listeners to come closer to being what God has proclaimed they should be. This way will strengthen the relationship with God and with community. Matthew 5: 38-48.

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 5: 38-48

P. 1503, Pew Bible

The Word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God!

Sermon

Perfect? Seriously?

Elizabeth Sigmon

We will use as our affirmation of faith the Nicene Creed which you will find in your bulletin.
Please stand as you are able.

*Affirmation of Faith

Nicene Creed

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds; God of God; Light of Light; Very God of Very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; Who for us, and for our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Lord and Giver of Life; Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; Who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the resurrection of the dead; and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Please be seated.

The world God created was created good. The world we live in is broken. God so loves us that we are offered grace and mercy for our brokenness. As God's beloved children we are invited to bring before God all of the burdens of brokenness that surround us. In our discipleship we are called to care for others and the world. We come now to offer our prayers for the healing of the world and the reconciliation of its peoples. Let us pray.

Prayers of Intercession & Lord's Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you make the sun rise on the evil and on the good, send rain for the righteous and the unrighteous. Give us grace to follow your example and show kindness toward friends and enemies so that our lives testify to your all inclusive love. You have set forth your law to guide our days; help us to seek to obey your commandments in spirit and intent, not as a way to earn merit but as the way to live in community with those around us. In love you have claimed us and declared us set apart to be holy, not through our abilities but through your grace. We try to respond to your grace and to proclaim your glory. In Christ's name you have commissioned us to be stewards of your mysteries, bringing justice to bear wherever injustice prevails. We strive to serve you as ambassadors of your good news for the

world, offering our labor in love, aiding in the restoration of others to the life you desire for all. Hear us as we pray for our neighbors in need. Those who live across town and those who live across the world. Then give us the courage to transform our words into actions. We pray for the poor, the homeless, and those who live on the streets. Protect them from those who would prey upon them, and use us to find ways to shelter and feed them so that your church may indeed be a refuge and sanctuary for those in want. Grant that we may not take them lightly since you have called them blessed. We pray for those who feel that they must steal or cheat to survive, those who hoard possessions well beyond their needs. Lead us to seek ways for society to share so that all may live in dignity. Where systems keep persons out of work, impel us to change those systems. Where systems of advantage cause harm to others, lead us to transform our way of thinking to include all. As we chain our doors for protection, may we also change what is outside our doors so that peace and security may come to abide in this land for all. We pray for those in homes, institutions and jails. Be with them and with those who serve them, performing their duties. Be with those who love and miss them, keeping their vigils of hope for a better future. We offer prayers for the sick and for those in distress-emotional and mental. Heal those who are sick in body, mind or spirit according to your will. Comfort them in their pain and restore them to wholeness of life. We pray for those who are caretakers for loved ones, may they feel your presence and gain strength. We pray for our friends, neighbors, community, state and nation in this time of divisiveness. Strengthen good will and help us to live in harmony, seeking reconciliation with those with whom we disagree. For those who hate us give us courage to refuse retaliation. Make us instruments of your reconciling love. For those whom we hate, give us grace to find forgiveness and love so we can build upon the foundation which Christ laid for us as we pray the prayer which he taught those who would follow him saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

As we read the passage from Leviticus, it becomes clear that the Lord cares how we use our resources. God cares whether we help the poor, pay just wages, or steal from others. It is clear from Jesus' teachings that he values benevolence, charity and equality. If these are the ways of God, then they should be our ways. We now bring our offerings in response to the divine love given to us.

Offering

Offertory

Dona Nobis Pacem, Traditional

*Gloria Patri

Glory Be to the Father

#252, CPH

*Prayer of Dedication

Gracious and generous Lord, with these gifts we express our desire to observe your law with wholeness of heart, to delight in your commandments with all that we have and are, to worship you not only when we are together in this hour, but also in the many different and sometimes difficult places we find ourselves when we are apart. Enable us as your beloved children to reach out to care for enemies as well as friends. May we remember that **we** are your church; your temple; your holy ones. Amen.

Our final hymn this morning provides us with a guide of how we are to move toward this goal of becoming the ones set apart by God; the ones who are holy because our God is holy. The lyrics tell us to speak often with God; study the Word and then act upon it as you encounter this world. Our hymn is #446 in the Christian Praise Hymnal: *Take Time to Be Holy*.

*Hymn of Sending

Take Time to Be Holy

#446, CPH

*Charge and Blessing

Paul told the Corinthians that as followers of Christ they were God's holy temple, the place where God dwells. It has been revealed to us how to live abundantly according to the ways of our Lord which lead to the abundant life. So when we leave the sanctuary, God goes with us. So we go in the name of Jesus to love friend and enemies, neighbor and stranger, the righteous and the lost, for God loves us all.

As we go, Christ the sure foundation will uphold us; the wisdom of the Holy Spirit will guide us and the perfect love of God will bless us with God's peace.

Postlude

We Will Serve, Kaiser

Perfect? Seriously?

Leviticus 19:2, "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.'" And the passage from Matthew which I just read concludes this way: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Holy because God is holy? Perfect because our heavenly Father is perfect? Seriously—that just seems a stretch when I look either into the mirror or around me at the state of the world. And within those statements there is found a tension that has been present among people of faith since we have records. The injunctions to be righteous—to be holy—are woven throughout. The expectations for justice are clearly stated. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we have recorded how often the people claimed by God failed to live into the decree to be righteous or holy. Often the people are found violating the pragmatic instructions which are also included

in this passage bringing the condemnation of the prophets sent by God. In his comments on the commandments which are to govern people, Jesus also sets some pretty high bars. I have frequently been asked about differences among various Protestant denominations. While reading commentaries on today's passages, I found it interesting that one of the differences was highlighted in a commentary by David Lose, a Lutheran minister. He begins a commentary with this statement about how to preach, not the Leviticus passage, but the Matthew one. He says that Martin Luther who began the Reformation did so because he felt that he could never live up to the standard he found in scripture—even living as a monk. One of the tenets of faith that he found was that while it was true that he could not achieve perfection, he had faith in the promise found in the resurrection of Jesus and that he was therefore saved by “faith alone.” According to Dr. Lose, this leads to what he calls the “Lutheran temptation” to not take what Jesus says here seriously. Dr. Lose says: “the Lutheran temptation is to handle difficult teachings by Jesus by assuming that Jesus did not really expect us to do these things, only to remind us of our inability to satisfy God’s commandments so that we might flee to Jesus for forgiveness and grace.”¹ If we take that approach, then the temptation is not to try because knowing the outcome will be failure, why bother? But what if Jesus was serious about these statements about how we are to interact with one another? What happens if we take these statements too seriously and believe that we can achieve holiness or perfection? What happens if we believe we can rid ourselves or society of sin? We then fall prey to the temptation to think ourselves sufficient and end up not really believing we need God’s grace—only God’s instructions and encouragement. John Calvin, another Reformation theologian, agreed with Luther that human beings could not achieve righteousness on their own—he called the human race totally depraved—depending upon God’s abundant grace and mercy for redemption. But he also viewed the decrees found in Scriptures as serving an essential part of a life of faith. The role of the instructions given to the people in the Torah was threefold: to curb behavior by the unlawful through fear of punishment; to serve as a mirror which would reflect what God intended human heart and life to be; to give guidance toward living as God intended. So let us go back to these passages with a view to taking them seriously, even knowing that we will be unable to fully live into the image of humanity that God has. The Leviticus passage begins much like the passages in Deuteronomy: You shall revere your mother and father. You shall keep my Sabbaths. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves. On the whole, I imagine most of us feel pretty good about ourselves in relation to those. If we look closely at the injunction against turning to idols in a broader sense—not just as casting images to worship—we might not be so confident. John Calvin said that the human mind is a factory for the creation of idols—creating all sorts of things to worship—power, money, security, etc. We can and do often make many things around us into important—central things and offer to them our allegiance. The Leviticus passage also contains the injunctions against stealing but adds a prohibition against defrauding your neighbor or withholding the wages of a laborer as connected to theft. Perhaps these additions are why we prefer only considering them as presented in Deuteronomy. Keeping theft to the simple

¹ Epiphany 7A: Telos from In the Meantime at www.davidlose.net February 13,2017

understanding of stealing property put it in the context of black or white activity. But although we also know that defrauding someone is wrong, or withholding payment of a debt is wrong we don't quite view that as the same as theft—often. There is also verse 9: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.” Verse 10: “You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.” God's instructions are very insistent that care should be given to others—and in an agrarian society, even gives the means by which this can be done. Don't take all of what you have for yourself, but share it with others less fortunate—including the alien. Placing that in amongst the other decrees—making the provision of others something that God commands is not usually thought of as on an equal footing with what we call the Ten Commandments, but in Leviticus it is found among them. Additionally, you shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. The list is actually extensive and is indeed a guide for how to live according to the image of humanity that God created and called good. What we have in God's commandments, especially if we look at the details for behavior given to us flows from the very character of God and provides for the grounding of the chosen community in ethical behavior. By the repetition of the phrase “I am the Lord” these verses do double duty. They implicitly name God as the enforcer of these laws and also inextricably link the exact details of the people's daily lives with God's own nature. The connection of the law given with the character of God thus marks daily human interactions as sacred. The way one treats one's neighbor within the law is, thus, an act of devotion to God. It serves to align the human realm with God's vision for creation. Our Levitical passage ends with the injunction to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus continues his teaching of the disciples about God's intent by restating things using the formula of stating a tradition based on the law with the disclaimer, “but I say to you.” Jesus asks those who follow him to go beyond what is accepted—to not seek an eye for an eye, but to resist an act of violence or evil by acting so as to shame the one who has acted so; to give more than is asked. In verse 43-44 Jesus says: “You have heard that was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you.” This is said in the context that it is easy to love those that are love you, those who share your values and culture—and he then asks: “do not even the tax collectors do the same?” And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” These are the comparisons made by Jesus—more is expected of those who are his disciples. Like Leviticus, these expectations are based on how his disciples treat others—not just other disciples, not just those of like traditions, but all. This is where we find that final injunction to be perfect—and often realize that we continually fall short of this universal love of the other. Earlier I mention one of the founding principles of Lutheran theology. John Wesley is considered the founder of Methodist thought and his concept was nearer the other end of the theological spectrum on this concept of perfection. His belief was that it was a goal which was achievable with God's help. John Calvin's take was that justification and sanctification were both accomplished by God—we are justified by faith which is a gift of the Holy Spirit and we are sanctified by God through the power of the Holy Spirit—but that it is not a completed process as long as we are living in this world. And it is not a passive process—it requires our efforts—

our participation in God's vision and purpose for our lives. The tense of the ending statement is future middle and what is translated as perfect could also be translated as complete or mature. If translated that way the statement is more a promise than a command. It could just as easily mean that you are to become what God created you to be. Loosely translated this sentence could mean: be the person and community God created you to be. God sees more in us than we do. God has plans and a purpose for each of us. When we strive to be what God intends, then we can help to create a different kind of world. Jesus calls this new world the kingdom of God—where violence doesn't always lead to more violence and hatred doesn't always kindle more hatred. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Can we do that—turn the other cheek, love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us? Not perfectly; sometimes not at all. But that isn't the point. Our job is not to bring in the kingdom—Christ does that. Our purpose is to live like we really believe Christ actually is bringing in God's kingdom. What we get to do is to practice living like Christ's disciples and citizens of this new kingdom---in the meantime—in the in-between time. This way of living is counter-cultural and always has been. It does not forget or minimize the presence of sin and evil in us or in the world. But neither does it assume that God is limited by our sin. Holy? Perfect? No. But we are called to live in this way and in our corner of the world to help change it for the better. Change it; not save it. Again, saving is Christ's job description not ours. And because Christ has promised to do that we can take care of what is around us, practicing to live like Jesus' disciples throughout the week—in all our daily routines. We come into the sanctuary each Sunday to be reminded of God's grace and forgiveness and then be sent out once more to live as part of Christ's kingdom. Martin Luther once said that the Christian life is not about arriving but always about becoming. The somewhat overused Presbyterian saying also reminds us that we are a work in progress: Reformed and always being reformed. Not there yet, but on the path following the teachings of the One who was. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.