



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

[www.mzluth.org](http://www.mzluth.org)

October 19, 2008

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Leviticus 19:1,2,15-18

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Leviticus 19:1,2,15-18

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 33

Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-10

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

### **The LORD is Your God...**

You are holy

You get to live reflecting holiness

One of the earliest memories I have from the congregation where I grew up, one of the first things that I really remember; I don't remember how old I was; I believe it was an evening service, like on a Sunday night or something like that. I'm not sure. But there was a dinner at church and there was a special worship service, not a regular worship service, and as a part of that worship service, separated from the rest of the congregation, sitting up in the front on the pulpit side, which in that church must have been the right side, I remember I was sitting on the left side in the back, was a group of people. As part of the service, they got called one by one up to the front of the church and they were given a gift, a token of thanks for their service to the congregation in having taught Sunday school at some time during the history of the congregation. If I remember correctly, it took quite awhile. There were 30-40 of them that went up there, one by one, and what really stuck with me was that my Dad was one of them. And I never knew my Dad had taught Sunday school, but apparently he taught for seven years a teen Bible study that they had on Sunday mornings. That was before I was born because I don't remember it at all. So I got to ask him some questions and found out about that and what was going on. It was kind of interesting. It was something that stuck with me. Here were these people that were separated from the rest of the congregation and then acknowledged as having done something to serve the Lord and his people. Each was given some kind of gift, some were large – those that had taught for 30-40 years. Some were small, but everyone was recognized.

That concept of being separated is in the Words that I just read to you from Leviticus 19. When God says, "Because I, the LORD your God, am holy" the basic root meaning of the word "holy" in the Hebrew is "separated." God is completely separated and other than anything we experience in this lifetime since Adam and Eve fell into sin. He is absolutely perfect, without sin, pure motives at all times, pure love at all times, pure justice at all times, and that's something that's completely separated from us because we tend to think either you are just, or you are loving, and you can't be both at the same time. But God is, so you see his separateness was obviously much more beyond what it was with that group of people that were acknowledged in the congregation where I grew up. I'm sure they lost their temper with the kids they taught. I have to believe it happened. I was a kid there. I knew some of them did it, and probably with good reason. Yet, they weren't perfect. They weren't holy.

But it does illustrate what it means by that word be “holy” because I, the LORD your God, am holy. Just to get the idea of the separateness that God says he wants us to have as we live in this world, in Leviticus 19, after he says to each and every one of his people of all time, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy,” he goes through a whole bunch of what that means with some of his two tables of the Law – love for God and love for the neighbor. We have just a few of them, verses 15, 16, 17 and 18, four verses pulled out from later in the chapter, but the whole chapter and the whole book is really filled with a lot of these kinds of commands.

So to be separate like God is; this is what he demands of you. Don’t pervert justice. Don’t show partiality. Judge your neighbor fairly. Don’t spread slander. Don’t do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. Don’t hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor so you don’t share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people. But love your neighbor as yourself. That’s how separate God wants us to be. Think about if we did all these things how separate we would be from the world around us.

But here’s the fact of the matter, right? We are not holy as God is holy. You hear those commands of our God and do you say to yourself, “I can stand before God, lift up my chin, look him in the eye and say, ‘Yep, done that, done that, done that.’” Be honest. You can’t. You’re not holy. None of us are. Don’t spread slander about your neighbor means literally “don’t talk in a bad way about him.” It’s not specifically slander as used in other places. It’s “don’t talk bad about him.” Kind of what Paul said in Ephesians—“let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, only what is useful for building others up.” How good are you doing with that one?

Rebuke your neighbor so you don’t share in his sin—we are pretty good at picking out other people’s sins, aren’t we? We aren’t always as good at picking out our own, but we are doggone good at seeing when someone else screws up, right? So then we must be just as good at rebuking them so that we don’t share in their sin, right? Or wrong?

It’s kind of an uncomfortable reading from Scripture today, isn’t it? “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” “Do this, do this, do this, do this – alright go have a nice day and a nice week. See you next week.” That would be pretty depressing now, wouldn’t it? So where is the good news in here? Did you notice it? Did you hear it? Did you see it? Because the editors of the New International Version of the Bible, the one we are using, have given us a visual clue that we should be holding tight to like a drowning man holding onto a life preserver. It’s right there in the reading on the back of your Bulletin.

Throughout Leviticus 19, God keeps repeating one phrase over and over. We have it, I think two or three times—“I am the LORD.” He says, “Because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” He says, over and over, “I am the LORD. I am the LORD.” It’s the ticking clock of Leviticus 19. It is keeping beat to every one of his commands. “I am the

LORD. I am the LORD.” You hear it so often as you read Leviticus 19 that you start to wonder if he has become a wide receiver in the NFL and only wants to talk about himself in the third person. Why does he keep saying “I am the LORD”? Does he just like hearing his name?

Do you notice what’s different about the word “LORD” on the back of your Bulletin? It’s all capital letters, right? That’s the word “Yahweh” in Hebrew, the word that God uses to describe himself as “the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love, showing love to thousands of generations that love him and keep his commandments.” That’s what he said in his own sermon on the name of the LORD in Exodus 34, which Moses had shared with the Israelites when God passed in front of him and proclaimed his name.

When the Israelites heard the word the “LORD,” they should have been thinking about the God of the covenant, the God of grace, the God who delivers, the God who saves. So, when we read this text and we hear all these commands of God and we see how completely and utterly we have not kept them, we better be hanging on tight to “I am the LORD” as the one who is telling us these commands because the fact that he is the covenant God, the God that keeps his promises, the God who promises to save, is our only hope. It was the LORD who said that he would have a child be born that would “be our righteousness” as he said in Jeremiah. “This is the name by which you will be called the LORD, our righteousness, our holiness, our separateness” because you and I don’t do all of these things of our own volition, of our own desire. You and I don’t really want to do any of these things because of our sinful nature.

God himself came and lived in our place perfectly, absolutely separated from anything that hinted of sin. Then God took him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness or the separateness of God—God’s Great Exchange—what God demands of you and me, God gave to you and me through the life and death of Jesus Christ. He gave it to the whole world. Then he gives it to us personally when he works faith in our heart, whether it’s through the water and the Word, through the Word alone, or whatever the case may be. God has given us what he demands of us.

So now, when he looks at us, he doesn’t see our stained garments. He sees the pure robe of Jesus’ righteousness. When God looks at us as believing saints, we are holy. You just said that about yourselves a little bit ago. Did you notice that? In the Creed, the holy Christian church, holy through the blood of Jesus Christ, holy through the work of the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith, the communion of saints. Saints literally means “holy ones.” We are a gathering of “holy ones” is what we just said about ourselves. Not because we have done it ourselves, but because God has done it for us.

Now because our God has made us holy, because the LORD has done this, we get to live, not have to live, we GET to live, we WANT to live in a way that reflects his holiness in a way that shows our love and our thanksgiving for him. So now these things—don’t pervert justice, don’t spread bad words about other people, don’t do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life, don’t hate your brother, rebuke him instead, don’t seek

revenge but love him—those become things that are at the top of our “to do” list along with all the other of God’s commands each and every day of our lives because God loved us first. Our God took away our sins so now we see these things as opportunities to serve our God, to serve our fellow believers, to serve even those who don’t believe as we live in a way that reflects God’s glory and shares his love so that we earn the right to speak of his love.

The challenges that come in our daily life to doing this, the challenges that come from inside of us, from outside of us, from around us, we meet head on and yes, at times we fall. But then we run to the blood of Christ and we are forgiven and renewed to live and serve God again.

That’s the essence of the Christian life, isn’t it? Not running away from these things, but meeting them head on, being educated by God’s Word, being motivated by his love and taking them head on and serving with the love that God has put into our hearts first. That’s the essence of the Christian life.

That’s why it pains me that as a congregation we don’t want to say “thank you” to those who serve among us as volunteers in a visible, tangible way by saying “thank you” to someone that the congregation has nominated and that the Stewardship Committee has selected out of that group and then giving them a small token of our appreciation for serving. Why don’t we want to do it?

What I have heard is because it will lead to envy. It will lead to slander. It will lead to jealousy. It will lead to problems. Don’t we have God’s answer right in front of us? “Don’t do that, and if you do, then repent. And if someone else does, rebuke your neighbor frankly so you don’t share in his guilt.” Isn’t that what our God has called us to do?

Maybe, just maybe, as we overcome our pettiness, as we overcome our “I’m more important than you are” attitude that leads to envy and jealousy and strife that we are worried about, maybe then, as we honor one another, some small child will see it and say, “That’s pretty cool! I would like to serve God too! I’d like to be separated from the rest because God loved me and took away my sins. I might even want to stand in a pulpit some day.”

Amen.