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The Promise of the Purpose & The Purpose of the Promise Leviticus 19:1-2 and 15-18

(Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 NRSV) 1 "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 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. ...15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Have any of you who are parents had the experience of having the following words come out of your mouth? Maybe it was when you were in yet another battle with your 13-year-old, the one who used to be so charming and helpful and quick to want to please but who now, you suspect some days, has been replaced in the middle of the night by a mouthy, sullen alien, who, when he's not practicing being mute or giving one-syllable answers to your questions, is constantly rolling his eyes and saying in the fetching whiny tone of voice "But whyyyyyy?" Or maybe it was when your eight-year-old told you that you didn't need to worry about her anymore, and since it was ok that "all the other parents" were letting their child do this or that then you should also let her do it. Or maybe it was after one too many times of trying to reason with your 5-year-old who thinks that he now knows everything about life and who was driving you to distraction with his insistence on wearing mismatched socks or eating only things that are crunchy or who wants to turn every piece of furniture and blanket you own into a "fort" right before company is coming for dinner. What are those words that parents since time immemorial have used to stop the argument? Here they are, in the dad

version: ***“I’m your father. That’s why!!!”***

Now that’s not exactly the way that God is portrayed as speaking in our scripture this morning, but it’s pretty close. Did you catch it in the reading? It happens twice: After giving the Hebrew people several sets of instructions, the text interrupts those instructions with what looks to be a very different kind of statement: **“I am the LORD.”** It makes me wonder whether we in fact have here only one side of a conversation being presented; I can imagine – because it is indeed attested to over and over again in the Old Testament. More than once in the Hebrew scriptures, while God is telling the people what He hopes and expects from them, the people are portrayed breaking into God’s recitation with some sort of complaint or wanting, like a petulant child, to ask why, and God stopping them, exactly as in our text for this morning, by saying: **“I am the LORD.” *I’m your Father, that’s why!*** What is going on here?

I have preached on this particular scripture once before, and on that occasion I noted how the Book of Leviticus really functioned for the Hebrew people as what I called a set of “house rules,” telling of the kinds of practices, the kinds of rules, the kinds of values, that those who count themselves as children of God need to have in order that they would be faithful, in order that they would thrive as a community. We can certainly question and wonder and even disagree about some of those rules, and we ought always to read them with the realization that one must always understand them in the context of a threatened, nomadic, desert people always on the verge of extinction and who didn’t know some of the science that we know. But, be that as it may, the insight of Leviticus is that every community if it is to thrive must indeed have a

set of “house rules” that express values and hopes and dreams. This morning, I want to suggest that this apparent interruption in the text – “I am the LORD” – is actually the key to every “house rule” that any church community ought to have, and it is an interruption that ought to guide our lives as individuals and as church. So, let’s take a look at how this might be.

Let me cut to the chase: I think underlying the Book of Leviticus are two things that are absolutely key to understand. In a phrase that I first learned from my wife Barbara once used in one of her sermons, in Leviticus what we find is a **promise** and a **purpose**. First, the **promise**: throughout the Bible, in both Testaments, God is shown as being with and for His people. Forever. Period. Yes, God can and did and does get angry sometimes with those whom He loves, but when all is said and done God has promised to be God. What does that mean? For me, it is what is at the very center of the gospel message, anticipated by the prophets and disclosed most fully in Jesus Christ: God loves you and me, God loves every creature that He has made unconditionally. God sometimes gets disappointed in the creatures He has made; God’s heart can be broken, even, by humanity’s ability to inflict hurt on one another. But God still loves. God’s love is not something that He will change His mind about. And so that means that we are loved, we are safe, we are secure, now and forever in God’s everlasting, eternal, unconditional love. That promise was expressed by the Apostle Paul in what I think is the very center of the Good News – that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that can ever separate you from the love of God. That is God’s

promise to the Hebrew people and that is God's promise to us through Jesus Christ.

But let's ask, à la the title of this sermon today, what is the *purpose* of that promise? For it's a promise that can get misused, unfortunately. Because while it is true that some people might say that "*since God loves me I can do whatever I want and God will **still** love me,*" and while finally that is true, that would be a terrible misuse of the promise that God has given to his people. Because, you see, the purpose of ANY promise is to change behavior. And I mean that not so much concerning the one who makes the promises – although that is surely true and obvious– but the one who is the recipient of the promise. What do I mean? Well, when someone makes a promise to you it is supposed to mean that you can rely on them, it is supposed to mean that you no longer necessarily have to do things the same way. All through their high school days I promised our children that if they were ever in a situation, a party say, where they were uncomfortable that they could call Barbara and me at any hour and once of us would come get them. No questions asked. We promised to be there for them. And so their behavior could change based on the content of that promise – they could go places and not have to worry in quite the same way about getting trapped; she could enjoy themselves knowing that there was a safety valve. It made them less nervous. It changed their behavior.

So what is the purpose of God's promise to His people? It is to change **our** behavior. It is to remind us that we don't have to always seek advantage over others, it means that we can turn away from the culture's false idea that it's ok to do whatever it

takes to win or secure an advantage because nobody else is going to look out for you. We can reject that attitude. For after, all, ask yourself this hard question: what have been those points in your life when you have behaved most badly? I can see some of you wincing, just as I am wincing inside when remembering some of those occasions. And I would suggest that some of those times when you or I behaved badly were when we got anxious about our life and decided that we had to “win,” or control things, or force things to go the way we wanted them to go. In the face of uncertainty or pain or loss, it’s very natural to become anxious about our fate – and try to force the future. I know I have been there, done that!

But God’s forceful “**I am the LORD**” is the reminder, the promise, that we need not be trapped by our anxieties or our worries; we need not act as if no one cared about us but us. Because that’s not true. The purpose of God’s promise to be with us come what may, to love us no matter how unlovable we may sometimes be, ought to serve to comfort us, to give us peace. But it also allows reminds us of something else, part of **our** sacred purpose in response to **God’s** promise. I would put that purpose this way: *“You and I are never put on this earth to do for just ourselves.”* We see that purpose in our passage for today when it reminds the Hebrew people that they aren’t to engage in injustice, and they are to remember the poor in everything that they do. And elsewhere in Leviticus there are very detailed laws about how to treat strangers with hospitality, and how not to harvest every last stalk of wheat from the fields because you always need to leave some for the hungry, and so on and so on and so on. Why? Because *You and I are never put on this earth to do just for yourselves.*” The book of Leviticus

reminds the Hebrew people – and us! – that the purpose of any individual’s life, the purpose of any family, the purpose of any friendship, the purpose of any church is always wider than just itself. And we know that is true, don’t we, if we’re honest? When an individual gets too absorbed with only his or her own needs and wants and desires, he or she often becomes cynical and hurtful. If a marriage doesn’t have as part of its reason for existence to do good for others beyond itself, then the two people often become increasingly unhappy. When a church finds itself not giving enough attention to those it can serve who are not part of it, or spending too much time on its own internal life, it often more and more finds itself squabbling and ineffective.

So let me see if I can sum things up: The Book of Leviticus contains a set of “house rules” for those who would be God’s people. But underlying those house rules is the promise, the unconditional promise, of God’s gracious and abiding and eternal love to each and all. But because of that very promise and the reassurance and peace that it can bring us, we are also given a purpose: to offer justice, hope, and healing to all those whom God loves, to remember, indeed, that *we are never put on this earth to do for just ourselves*. Now you might ask, all that from that little Divine interruption – “**I am the LORD**”? Yes, I think so. Because it is the nature of God to again and again and again interrupt our lives where they need interrupting with a reminder of what He has done for us and what He expects of us. It is the nature of God to find a way to haul us up short when we are tempted to believe only in our own efforts, only in our own devices, only in our own works. It is the nature of God, as one theologian put it, to

interrupt us by comforting the afflicted – and afflicting the comfortable!

Let me close in this way: While I don't usually preaching from the lectionary – that three-year cycle of scriptures that many churches and preachers use to guide their worship and preaching – I nonetheless think that it is fascinating that these are the only verses from the Book of Leviticus that are included in the lectionary. Why? Why are these verses so key among all the other verses, all the other "house rules" in the book that *could* have been singled out lifted up? It's because of that last line, isn't it: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*"? For this is the verse that Jesus Himself expressly quoted – of all the things he **could** have quoted from all the books of the Hebrew Bible – as showing what it means to follow Him. "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" **That** is the purpose at the heart of God's promise to us in Jesus Christ, the promise on this day when we begin a new year of program and ministry and outreach and fellowship and on every day -- that God loves us forever. May our hearts and souls and minds be comforted indeed by this promise – and may our actions show that indeed we know how to love others in God's name and for the sake of the purpose God has for us!