

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

7th Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

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Text: Leviticus 19:1-2, 10-18

Title: “Fresh Start: Overcoming SAD—Spiritual Affective Disorder. Leave Room for Dessert”

When I finished seminary, I was appointed to a two-point charge outside of Caro. In fact, I was Aaron Wiles’ pastor when he was just a little boy. My how things change! Aaron is now our drummer in the 11:15 service. He is no longer a little boy and, in fact, has a little boy of his own, and I...well, I’m just a bit older.

When Lynn and I lived in the thumb, we were young and money was very tight. I had loans from college and seminary that we had to start paying off. Our old car needed to be replaced. We had a 3-month old son and Lynn was going to school part-time working on her bachelor’s degree. Things were tight and we argued more than once about money.

One of the things we did there, though, to help with the budget was to plant a garden. There were farmers in the congregation and they were very generous in helping us plow a spot next to the church, loading it with cow manure and loaning me a rototiller to work it all in. We had a great garden that produced more than either of us imagined. But it wasn’t just the garden produce that helped us get by. Aaron’s Mom and Dad lived out in the country—and still do. They happened to have a field near their home in which the farmer planted potatoes, and Aaron’s parents invited us to come and glean those potatoes that the harvester didn’t pick up. They said the farmer was aware that people did this and had no problem with it, was happy to have people pick up what would otherwise rot in the field.

So Lynn and I drove over to the Bo and Joann’s home one evening, parked our car and took our baskets out into the potato field and gleaned potatoes. Joann had shared with us that they did so every year, and she canned them. So we dug through the dirt of the field, picked up our potatoes, went home and canned into the wee hours of the morning.

This reading from Leviticus reminded me of having my hands in the dirt digging for potatoes left by a generous farmer. Now for those who have tried to read the Bible from cover to cover, it is common that the motivation for approaching Bible reading in this way dies in the middle of Leviticus, probably because Leviticus is filled with minute rules and regulations most of which just do not make sense to us in our day and culture. In fact, one scholar wrote that “For most of us, Leviticus is like the dark upstairs attic – we know it’s up there, but we’re not real excited to see what’s in it” (Daniel Ogle, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/seventh-sunday-after-the-epiphany1#preaching>).

I think he's right about that, and yet this particular section of Leviticus is part of what is called "the holiness code" which focuses on purity and holiness before God. What we read here recalls the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 and elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. These verses express the truth that how we love God is evident in every action we take, which is why "I am the Lord" is repeated so often because each behavior is a reflection of who God is. It is a demonstration of the character of God. And while it may be true that we are not real excited to see what's in Leviticus, it is the backdrop for the two Great Commandments of Jesus: The first being to "... love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:38-40).

It's the answer the lawyer is looking for in the Gospel According to Luke when he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him what is written in the law? What do you find there?" And the Bible scholar lawyer repeats "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus' response to him was "...Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:28). This Bible scholar lawyer looked to Leviticus in his response to Jesus.

In reading this passage, this morning I'd like to ask for your help. Whenever you see "I am the Lord your God" or "I am the Lord" it will be highlighted in yellow which is the part I invite you to read. Again, this follow-up phrase is a clear reminder that what has been said before is a characteristic of God. It is who God is and how God behaves and it is what God expects of those who follow God.

19 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. 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. 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: I am the Lord your God. 11 You
shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one
another. 12 And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the
name of your God: I am the Lord. 13 You shall not defraud your
neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the
wages of a laborer until morning. 14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a
stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.
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.

This lengthy list begins with God proclaiming "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." If you want to know what it looks like to be holy, here is the list. This is how

God acts in the world and this is how God calls us to act . To live and behave in the world this way is what it means to live a holy life. So here's a compilation of God's holiness:

- Be generous: don't hoard your property or food; leave some for the poor and the stranger.
- Be honest: don't steal, lie, or cheat your neighbor.
- Be fair: don't take advantage of the blind or the deaf or anyone who is vulnerable; treat the poor the same as you do the rich and when it comes to justice treat the rich the same as you do the poor.
- Be loving: don't lie or slander, don't profit by the harm of your neighbor, don't hate, don't hold grudges.
- Be generous, be honest, be fair, be loving.

Wednesday night as I sat at the Grace A. Dow Library in Midland for the Heroin Summit, I was thinking about this passage from Leviticus. It might be something only a preacher would do, I don't know. But I was listening and learning about this epidemic we are facing with opioid and opiate addiction. Since Kris Wise called about his concern about this problem, I've learned that opioids are synthetic drugs that have similar addictive properties to opiates which are plant derived. From the American Society of Addiction Medicine, I've learned that

- Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in the US, with 52,404 lethal drug overdoses in 2015. Opioid addiction is driving this epidemic, with 20,101 overdose deaths related to prescription pain relievers, and 12,990 overdose deaths related to heroin in 2015.
- The overdose death rate in 2008 was nearly four times the 1999 rate; sales of prescription pain relievers in 2010 were four times those in 1999; and the substance use disorder treatment admission rate in 2009 was six times the 1999 rate.
- In 2012, 259 million prescriptions were written for opioids, which is more than enough to give every American adult their own bottle of pills.
- Four in five new heroin users started out misusing prescription painkillers.
- 94% of respondents in a 2014 survey of people in treatment for opioid addiction said they chose to use heroin because prescription opioids were "far more expensive and harder to obtain."
(<http://www.asam.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/opioid-addiction-disease-facts-figures.pdf>)

According to an MLive.com article:

1. The numbers are rising

In 2014, 568 people in Michigan died related to opioid overdose, while 433 people died related to heroin overdose. Those numbers are on the

rise over 15 years, increasing from 99 heroin or opioid overdose deaths in 1999 to 1,001 in 2014, according to numbers from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. That's 10 times as many deaths, or a 911 percent increase over 15 years.

3. The epidemic isn't only in Michigan

From 2000 to 2014, the rate of overdose deaths involving opioid pain relievers and heroin increased 200 percent nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease and Control.

During 2014, a total of 47,055 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States, representing a 1-year increase of 6.5 percent, from 13.8 per 100,000 persons in 2013 to 14.7 per 100,000 persons in 2014.

5. When addicts can't get pills, some use heroin

A certain number of people prescribed opioid painkillers become addicted, typically moving from painkillers like hydrocodone to more powerful drugs like oxycodone. When those drugs become too expensive, some move to heroin, Wesolowicz said. The variable potency of heroin is part of the reason there are many overdose deaths on the street drug, Wesolowicz said. "It's cheaper to get a hit of heroin on the street than it is to get prescription painkillers," she said. Sometimes heroin is mixed with other drugs like Fentanyl, making it even more dangerous.

I was listening to statistics like this at the Heroin Summit and thinking about Leviticus because it's clear that this is not what it means to be holy, what it means to be living a holy life. I was listening and thinking that I have been quite ignorant of the serious struggles my neighbors are experiencing with this epidemic until Kris Wise shared the burden on his heart. I was listening and thinking that this is a problem that reveals that a lot of people are profiting from the blood of their neighbors as the stuff is made and sold and taken. It hurts families and friends and communities. It breaks the hearts of those who love the addicted.

One young woman, a recovering addict, stood up at the summit on Wednesday and shared her story. She was 30 years old and said the drug use started when she was a teenager. Her addiction progressed to the point that she found herself in Detroit being used by a man, "exploited" was her word to describe her situation. She said it was only through the love of her parents that she was able to stop being exploited and come back home and enter recovery again. It's not just the drugs that result in profiting from a neighbors blood, I thought. Some women are being doubly victimized.

"...you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord."

This is not what God wants for any one of our neighbors. I realize that for many of us this doesn't touch us directly. That is, I'm guessing no one here is selling heroin on the streets

and no one here is prostituting anyone for personal financial gain. Yet I wonder about bearing grudges against those who suffer from the disease of addiction, something Leviticus says is not what it means to live a holy life and not of God. I wonder if you've thought of addicts as bad people and that we should lock up all users and abusers. I know I have my own work to do on my inner attitudes. One of the things that has clarified my thinking is that I learned that it takes a person 3-5 attempts at recovery before being successful—if they are successful—at maintaining recovery. It's a painful, difficult road for a person to move into recovery, and though it was clear at the summit that the person has to want it, it was also clear that those who have people around them who love them are far more successful in maintaining sobriety.

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

On Tuesday of this week, there are two assemblies being held at Western High School to address this issue of drug use. I will be attending the morning assembly and ask that you please pray for these assemblies and your neighbors attending that through it lives will be saved and hearts touched, that God's will for everyone will be done.

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

Loving your neighbor as yourself has to do with being holy as God is holy. When Jesus was asked by the Bible scholar lawyer in Luke's Gospel how to inherit eternal life which means to live with God--in God--always in this life and beyond, Jesus asked him what his Bible said, and the response was as I mentioned earlier “Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself.” And then the lawyer asks him a follow up question: “And who is my neighbor? If I am to love my neighbor, then who exactly are you referring to, Jesus?”

It's a fair question really. And so Jesus launches into the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan. You may remember it's the story of a man who is on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. He's jumped on the way. Beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Along comes a priest—someone you'd expect would help--who sees the man and avoids him walking by on the other side. Then comes a Levite, a lay person—another person you'd expect would help, who also sees the man and walks by on the other side. Finally, a Samaritan comes along—Samaritans were despised by Jews—and he sees the man and quickly goes to him, puts bandages on his wounds and takes him to an inn, pays for his room and his care.

After telling the story, Jesus asks the lawyer who was the real neighbor to the man? “The one who showed him mercy,” he said. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus told him.

Jesus and this lawyer are pointing to Leviticus 19 in this conversation. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.” A little later in chapter 19 of Leviticus, God goes further in speaking to the people about what it means to be holy as God is holy.

33 When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSV)

I was thinking about this passage and Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan two Sundays ago when Lynn and I attended an open house at the Islamic Center in Midland. We went with some friends of ours not as any kind of political statement. I went because I wanted to learn more about the aliens among us. I went because I believe Jesus loves them as much as Jesus loves me.

When we arrived the place was completely packed with people. There was a carpeted area where we were invited to sit after taking our shoes off. The people were very gracious and kind. There was food and talking and laughter. There were planned speakers and prayers. One father from Pakistan stood and said they have been afraid for their daughter who decided she wanted to begin wearing her head scarf to school. They had decided as a family she wouldn't do it early in her life because they were afraid of what might happen to her if she was identified as a Muslim. But now in her senior year his daughter said she did not want to hide who she was any more and so wanted to wear the traditional head scarf. Her parents were afraid, but they discovered to their surprise that people were very kind to their daughter. They discovered that their fears were unjustified.

Another man from Syria spoke. He spoke about how grateful he was to be able to live and work in this country because he has so many more freedoms here than he ever had in his home country. He said he was proud to be in the U.S. He also said he is afraid for his brother in law whose family is in danger of being deported. He said if that happens the family has nowhere to go because a Syrian military government official had confiscated his home. They just took it from him, and he has no place to which to return, so they are afraid.

I left there feeling like I'd been in the company of kind-hearted Samaritans, the kind of people Jesus calls me to love, the kind of people who really are neighbors.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

This is the last week we will be offering you some spiritual practice homework. This week you are invited to take a break from a treat you may give yourself, like a latte in the morning or eating lunch out and then contributing what you would have spent on that treat toward some ministry that expresses love for a neighbor. There are several options listed on the insert. But I'd also like to ask you to please take another shot at the Random Acts of Kindness tree in Fellowship Hall. There are still some opportunities there to care for someone and we will be leaving it up until they are all gone, so consider caring for someone by offering a RAK and let's clear off the tree.

I'd like to close by asking if anyone would like to share briefly about one of the acts of kindness you carried out and how you felt about doing it.

WEEK 7: SPIRITUAL PRACTICE HOMEWORK—FAST FROM EXCESS AND GIVE

This week, consider taking a break from any "extras" or treats you might normally indulge in during the week—trips to Starbucks or fast food lunches, for example. Taking a mini-fast from unnecessary consumable goods can open our eyes to just how often we indulge in what we truly don't need. Then consider contributing what you would have spent on your little “indulgence” to one or several AUMC ministries:

1. The food pantry
2. The Missions Ministry Team
3. The youth mission trip fund
4. The United Methodist Women as they generously contribute to many causes for others.
5. The United Methodist Men's community garden which gives directly to neighbors.