

## “Caught in the Tension.”

At the beginning of our first reading, God tells us that we are to be “holy,” just as He is “holy.” And at the end of our last reading, Jesus tells us that we are to be “perfect,” just as God is “perfect.” It all seems like a pretty tall order.

According to several of my sources, in both cases the meaning is essentially the same. That is, we are to become “something special” in the world, something “out of the ordinary,” people who leave the world a better place than when we found it. Or, as Jesus described it in our gospel reading a couple of Sundays ago: we are to be the “salt” and “light” of the world.

How we do these things is explained — at least in part — by those two readings. At first blush, our reading from Leviticus seems to be describing what our relationship with those who are more *vulnerable* than us should look like. And our reading from Matthew seems to be describing what our relationship with those who are more *powerful* than us should look like.

Let’s first consider what we’ve heard in our reading from Leviticus.

First of all, I think it’s worth noting that this is the only time *any* passage from Leviticus appears in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, on the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany. And, because the season of Epiphany is not usually this long, we may have to wait not just three years, but six years or even nine years before we get a chance to hear it again.

Another thing you may not know about the book of Leviticus, is this: It records more words from the mouth of God than any other book of the Bible. So, today we have this rare opportunity that I want us to take advantage of, and so we will.

First, I want to draw your attention to the second paragraph of our reading from Leviticus, where we find these words:

“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. 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” (vv. 9-10).

I am in possession of an excellent Jewish commentary on the Torah, and it describes this passage as putting forth “the rights of the poor at harvest time.” It continues to explain that this

“passage is not an appeal to the generosity of the landowner. [Rather, it] confers the right to glean and to harvest the uncut edge on those who have no resources of their own.”

The *right* to glean and the *right* to harvest; let’s not forget that.

And then, my excellent commentary concludes its reflections on this particular verse by saying that it

“is perhaps the oldest declaration that the disadvantaged members of the society have *a right to the support from that society* and should not be dependent on voluntary benevolence alone (emphasis mine).”

I can’t speak for you, but when I first read this passage of scripture, and its commentary, I needed to pause and really think about what it was saying to us. Because it seems to me that we live in a time when so much of our social discourse is generally *not very sympathetic* towards the poor, and *even less sympathetic* towards those who are not native to this country. But here, this morning, we’ve just heard the words of God reminding us that the poor and the alien have the right — and not because of the status of their citizenship, or the color of their skin, or even the balance in their checkbook --- they have a *right* to expect society to provide them with everything they *need* if they’re unable to obtain it for themselves ... just because they’re human beings ... just because they’re God’s children.

And that, my friends, takes my breath away.

Now, there’s a lot more in our reading from Leviticus, but I’ll leave that for another day (another year?) because we’ve heard a lot of it before, and none of

the commentary is all that surprising. So, let's now turn to our reading from Matthew's gospel.

Time and time again — and this reading included — Jesus challenges us by encouraging us to do things that are contrary to human nature. For example, in this section of the Sermon on the Mount “Jesus tells his disciples (and us!)

to turn the other cheek,

to forgo revenge,

to give more than the required amount in a lawsuit,

to go the extra mile,

to give to all who beg,

to lend without limits,

to love the enemy,

to pray for persecutors,

and to greet the stranger [and alien].”

We've heard all this before, but it still never fails to give me pause each time I hear it again. Because it always reminds me of just how far away I am from the standard of behavior that Jesus sets forth. And I guess the reason I'm so slow in embracing all of these challenges is because they seem so unreasonable, and so out of the norm.

Another commentary I looked at this week made this observation:

“This text carries two challenges. First, Jesus teaches about life in God's realm. God's community is filled with people who think of others first. Every decision and action is carried out for the common good. Each person is sister or brother to the other and acts out of love. The capacity for this kind of love is due to the empowering love given by God, who is love. We are able to be gracious, forgiving, hospitable, and generous because

we are children of the God who showers us with abundant grace, mercy, love, and protection. Those who know god's love now can love their enemies; those who experience God's forgiveness now can forgive those who persecute them; those who claim God's gift of generosity can now give back to those who have little or nothing. We are able to do these things because in Jesus we live in the days of God's reign.

“Second, Jesus lets his listeners know that he himself embodies these values. He moves us from “you have heard that it was said” to “but I say to you.” We no longer have to rely solely on the written word to understand God and God's will for creation. We simply have to look at and listen to Jesus. Jesus shifts the authority from what was to himself — God's word made flesh and dwelling in our midst. Because of Jesus, God's realm is already present and moving toward its fulfillment. Within us already are the marks of those fully embraced by God and empowered by God's will. Jesus calls us to maturity that results in more Godlike behavior and motivations.”

Today, these two readings — Leviticus and Matthew — remind us that we are caught in the tension between human nature and being the children of God. In the end, the call to be “perfect” — the call to be “holy” — is not to add pressure to our already overwhelmed lives; but rather, it assures us that we are not alone in the world, and that God continues to work in and through us. In fact, the perfection and holiness to which we've been called, is less about getting things right, and more about loving as God loves, and Jesus is for us a concrete example of that love.

Let us pray:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.