



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2017

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 | Psalm 119:33-40 | I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 | Matthew 5:38-48

Whenever I go to see a movie, before I get to see the featured attraction, there are always previews of coming attractions first. I think that is what is happening with the readings for today. The featured attraction is the Feast of the Transfiguration, the high point and end of the season of Epiphany before we begin the downward hard path of Lent. But before we get to that point, there are the readings for today. In a real sense, the readings for today give us a glimpse of what our transfiguration would look like. We have climbed the mountain with Jesus in this Epiphany season. If we are alert, we may see a vision of the holiness that God has in store for us. We may see a vision of what God meant for us to be and what we shall one day become.

All of the readings focus on being holy. Paul reminds us that we are God's temple. Using the familiar image of building, he tells us that, like a master builder, he has laid the foundation of that temple for us. Now it is up to us to build the temple. He tells us that the foundation of this holy temple is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. With that solid foundation, we can build with confidence.

But how are we to build the holy temple of God in our lives? The readings from Leviticus and Matthew provide us with some answers. Both readings focus on what it means to be holy. Leviticus 19 begins by telling us: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." The reading from the Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus telling us: "Be holy, therefore, as your heavenly Father is holy." But what does it mean to be holy? A superficial understanding would suggest something or someone who is set apart from the stresses and interactions of daily life, only to be encountered on special occasions, with awe and reverence. These readings, however, remind us that holiness is not something that is set apart, not a private philosophy or private bliss. Holiness is an active endeavor, something we are to practice in the very midst of our daily life.

The passage from Leviticus sets forth five actions that show us what holiness requires. In verses 9 and 10, holiness requires economic integrity in the public square. Translated into modern terms, it lays out the holy requirements of the safety net to be provided for those less fortunate than we are.

Holiness requires economic generosity. In verses 11 and 12, holiness requires moral integrity which refuses to look down on others, cheat them or to dismiss them unthinkingly as "the other" who are not like us. In verses 13 and 14, holiness requires social integrity which does not seek to defraud others of their good name, their dignity or their needs. In verses 15 and 16, holiness requires us to resist the insidious pull of polarization which only listens to those who think like us and is quick to decry those who do not think like us. The most important and the hardest requirement of holiness is left for last: "You shall not hate in our heart...take vengeance... or bear a grudge against anyone..." Holiness is all encompassing. It reaches into every area and aspect of our lives. This, Leviticus tells us, is how we should go about building the holy temple of God in our lives.

The passage from Matthew echoes and reinforces the message we have just heard from Leviticus. Jesus himself gives us the key to understanding how holiness fits in with these difficult sentences. The key insight into the holiness that Jesus calls us to put in practice can be found when he warns us: "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but then can do no more. Rather, fear the one who, after killing our body can also kill our soul." In this light, resisting the evildoer with the evildoer's own tactics means we come very close to losing both our life and our soul. We cannot fight the evildoer with the evildoer's own weapons and hope to prevail. If, when we are insulted, we reply with more insults, we allow ourselves to be bound to the evildoer. If, when we are attacked, we attack back, we fall into a trap. Do not allow the evil that is done to us to control how we react. Do not let it bind you. Let it wash over you but not enter into you. We can only be free and holy when strive to forgive. Otherwise, we may end up losing our holiness in exchange for a fleeting feeling of satisfaction that leaves us worse off than we were before. Again, the most important and hardest requirement is left for last: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is in this way we show we are children of God. It is in this way we show forth the holiness of God. This, Matthew tells us, is how we should go about building the holy temple of God in our lives.

These are not counsels of perfections that only saints and spiritual athletes can put in practice. Jesus calls us all to live out this sort of holiness. Let me tell you a story of one such encounter. On June 15, 2015, the Evil One entered into the mind and heart of Dylan Roof. He bought the lies the Evil One and allowed his mind and heart to be consumed with hate against innocent people. Consumed by that hate, he entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine people there. Despite the deep personal hurt Bethanie Middleton-Brown had suffered over the senseless loss of her sister, she stood up at the time of Roof's sentencing and said: "You can't have my joy. It's simply not yours to take. You can't have it. So I guess you will spend the rest of your time being angry because you cannot have it. The other thing you will be angry about is because you didn't win. You couldn't make me hate you. May God bless you." This is what transfiguration looks like. This is how Ms. Middleton-Brown showed herself to be the holy temple of God. And the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

We have travelled up the mountain with Jesus. We have seen a vision of how the holiness of God should play out in our lives. We have caught a glimpse of what God means us to be and what we will one day fully be. But we cannot stay on the mountain. We cannot build the holy temple of God on the mountain. The holiness of God requires us to come down from the mountain and face all of the hurts and harms and half-fulfilled hopes of daily living. We can take the foundation for that holy temple of God with us as we come down from the mountain. The Psalmist has it right: "Teach me, O Lord, the way your statutes, and I will keep them to the end." This is how we build the holy temple of God in our lives.

So, come, let us be on our way. Amen.