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Alexandria, VA 22310
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I Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23
Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

WE TEACH WHAT WE KNOW

So how do we go about the task of teaching the meaning of being holy? To put it simply, what does it mean to be holy?

When we are joined with a worshipping community; when we sign up for next Sunday's meal; when we put our name down to show up on the Saturday where we work on a habitat project, does anyone ever come to us and say, "OK, now that you've volunteered, I need to explain to you how to be holy." No one ever says to us, "I will teach you the meaning of what it is to be holy." No one ... except those who are willing to be used by God. It sounds like such a simple formula, doesn't it? You shall be holy for the Lord your God is holy.

I think as a congregation we have all been exposed or seen someone else who's been exposed to a series of books by Martha Grace Reese. We started on a church officer retreat trying to grasp the meaning of her book about the heart, and quickly we began in Church School to study her book about the church, her books about the gospel, her book about the soul. About how all of these are the essence of what it means to be alive in the faith. Time and again in her series, she reminds us that you cannot give away what you do not have. You cannot give away the faith if you've never reflected and put in words an understanding of your own faith. Put another way, you cannot teach what you do not know.

But what do we really know about being holy? We hardly ever talk about it. The closest we come is when we might sing about it. We might even pray about it if somebody else does the praying.

But what does it mean to be holy? When I came here at the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005, there was an event in history that might help us understand. I remember reading about a young man who had sold his 1999 Volkswagen Golf on Ebay. He sold this vehicle in 2005 for \$250,000! It was six years old. It had 47,000 miles on it. And the young man had only paid \$10,000 for that same car. But as he did a title search, he found a former owner named Joseph Ratzinger, who had just left Germany to take a job in Italy as Pope Benedict XVI, and this young man had the pope's car. Maybe that's what we think holiness means—you are holy by association. At least someone felt that way for a car that had once been owned by the pope—it must have some holy qualities—and they paid a quarter of a million dollars for that car.

And maybe there's more truth in that holy event that we recognize in the first place. You see, when we align our daily human actions with God's vision, there's the potential for holiness to occur. *Be honest because of who I am as your God. Show compassion because of my character as the holy one. Be especially careful to practice the highest eth-*

ics when you deal with day laborers or the poor or the vulnerable with your neighbor, and with your family because I am the Lord.

In addition, God says you need this love, this service within your own community in your life. You need it as much as those who receive it. You need to give it as much as the widows and the orphans need it to survive. *You need it because you pledged yourself to me and when you say you love me and you love your neighbor, you take on a whole new identity.* Yes, we can learn, we can even know what it means to be holy by associating our lives with the one who speaks in Leviticus.

Being holy always requires a special designation—a setting apart, a reserving for special purpose—so when we learn to designate our actions, our possessions, our home as holy, we in essence associate what we have and who we are with who God is in our life.

We all know what it is to have Sunday clothes, Sunday shoes, or at least we used to. Those were the things you only wore to church on Sunday or to weddings or to funerals. I think it was three churches ago there was a water main break at the day school at that church, and there was a tractor dealership across the church. It didn't take me long to put two and two together. I went over and the owner, who I knew in civic clubs around town, and asked him to let me drive a new backhoe across the street to dig up the water main because we couldn't get anyone to come out. The children sat on the side or the playground on the steps to the church, and they watched and as I took that first bucket of muck and tried to move it over. I let it go too quick and mud splashed all over me. One of the little girls said to me, "Does your wife know you're playing in your Sunday clothes?"

I wonder if we recognize that as a congregation the very root words of what it means in Leviticus that we have been set apart as a people. We have values because God has designated us to show the holiness that we only play at most of the time. Holiness in Leviticus is different—it's other stuff. It's not stuff we had before and it's not stuff we understand. He's giving them instructions on how to harvest a vineyard—how to bring in the crop that had been planted in the spring. These folks are still in the desert. They haven't planted a crop in years. What he's saying is strange. They're still wandering. They're still nomads. And he's giving them instructions for when they get to the holy land. This Leviticus stuff is different. It's other worldly. But it's what we need if we are going to live in God's way.

I fear that somehow for us holiness is translated as being kind. Or worse, that sin is translated as having poor taste. There's something much bigger going on. God is not some super version of us. God is holy. God is God, and we have a clear and vivid description of how we're supposed to live together, how we're supposed to achieve God's purpose. *Because I am the Lord, stop hating one another. Stop judging one another. Start loving your neighbor as yourself.* But let's stop. Let's take the master teacher's words and let's understand God's purpose through them. Let us be holy as we stand and affirm our faith using words from the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other

also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Amen.