

HOLES IN THE HOLY

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Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, 33-34 and Matthew 22:34-40

Some years ago there was a popular country song by Mac Davis with a bold refrain:

*Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better looking each day.*

To know me is to love me, I must be a (heck) of a man.

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble but I'm doing the best that I can.

Even Mary Poppins might have a problem singing that not-so-humble song since she is just “*practically perfect in every way.*” Most of us know that we are not even close to *practically perfect* let alone *perfect in every way*. In Paul’s words, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” Surely God knows this, yet there is the LORD telling Moses to tell the people of Israel, “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*” Surely Jesus knew this, yet there he is, delivering his Sermon on the Mount to the collection of sinners gathered all around him and saying, “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

Be holy. Be perfect. Those seem like awfully high expectations of God for people like us, unrealistic expectations for us who are not perfect in any way, are unholy in a lot of ways, and hope for only modest improvement at best when it comes to perfection and holiness. What is God asking of us with those lofty commands: be holy, be perfect? Does God want us to be frustrated perfectionists, unsatisfied saints, or perhaps delusional egotists who can sing a variation of Mac Davis’ song with unnerving confidence:

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you're holy in every way...?

How can God command holiness and Jesus talk about perfection to imperfect sinners like us whose holy lives are full of unholy holes?

It is worth noting that neither of these commands exists in a vacuum. The command to be perfect is followed by the Great Commandment. And the command to be holy is followed by a series of instructions about what holiness looks like, each punctuated with a reminder, “*I am the LORD your God!*” We who

are created in the image of God are called to reflect that divine image in day-to-day living. As one writer notes,

*Whenever we open our mouth, open our door, extend our hand in gestures kind or rude, our neighbor catches at least a glimpse of "the Lord our God."*¹

What kind of God do your neighbors glimpse when they meet you –

a God of love, mercy, grace, justice, and peace, or

a God of revenge, sass, disdain, greed, and indifference?

Who is the God who your neighbors see in you? The God whose image we reflect is a holy God and for that reason, we are to be holy reflections. Lest we be confused about what that reflection might look like in our lives, God offers a series of examples, all of which might be summed up in the 18th verse of that 19th chapter of Leviticus which Jesus quotes as part of the Great Commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself*.

To be holy is not to be in a holier-than-thou state of mind. It is not being so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good. It is not striving to be more religious than God! It is to be holy in practice, by loving and living as God calls us to love and live: *love your neighbor as yourself*. As Frederick Buechner suggests:

*Only God is holy, just as only people are human. God's holiness is God's Godness. To speak of anything else as holy is to say that it has something of God's mark upon it. Time, places, things, and people can all be holy, and when they are, they are usually not hard to recognize.*²

We who are created in the image of God bear that mark of God and so are called to be holy as God is holy, to be loving as God is loving, to be righteous and just as God is righteous and just. Does anyone recognize such holiness in you – do they recognize something different that bears the mark of God? Do you see that holiness in others, that mark of God that suggests something or someone is holy?

On this All Saints' Sunday we recall some holy examples of saints from our midst whose lives bore the mark of God and who offered glimpses of God in holy moments, people like

Marge Chittum for whom the kitchen was a holy site for a lot of baking for others
Donna Esther who teamed with Richard to build a community of caring and
learning in their Sunday School class

Don Whiteman who gathered the men of the church together each month for
fellowship at the Depot

Ginny Francisco whose fierce advocacy for young women to reach their potential

knew no bounds – and by that I mean, no bounds!
None of them were perfect; none of them had halos shining above their heads day to day, but in and through their lives, they offered to us and to the world glimpses of God’s holy hand at work.

To be holy is to live a certain way, a way that God describes in those verses we heard a moment ago, a way that is marked by love for your neighbor, even the neighbors who you might not think of as neighbors – the poor who live on the other side of town, the hungry who live down the street whose names you don’t even know, the refugee and immigrant in your midst, the laborer who works for you. In other words, all those people you might encounter in the course of a day in one way or another – the checkout clerk at the grocery store, the child at the next fast-food table, the client in your office, the student in your class, the patient in your clinic, the stranger on the street, including those strangers who you might want to avoid at all costs – all these are neighbors you are to love. It is love demonstrated in compassion, honesty, and fair play; love that is as tangible as the good grapes left in the vineyard for the poor to glean so that they will not go hungry. It is love that does not engage in lying or name-calling or swearing or taking advantage of those who are vulnerable in any way. It is love that seeks reconciliation instead of revenge, love that treats the alien – the immigrant or refugee in our midst – not like a criminal but like a fellow citizen; it is love that offers no abuses, and makes no excuses. *I the LORD your God am holy*, says the LORD, and you who are created in my image are to be holy in this way!

That holiness is pretty practical even for unholy people like us. It is not the sole province of Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, and your great-grandmother who everyone agrees was a saint. It is holiness that is demanded of all who are created in the image of a holy God. It is holiness that, if practiced by all of us, might bring civility to our politics, justice to our communities, and peace to our world. It is holiness that begins with you and me, holiness that makes no excuse when your neighbor is acting in an unholy manner or is just a holy terror, for you reflect the image of the holy God who calls YOU to be holy always. Every time that you live into that holy calling, you offer to the world another glimpse of our holy God. Every time that you shirk that responsibility, you incur guilt upon yourself and betray the God who made you. The Lord does not say, *“Be holy as long as everyone else is holy.”* The Lord does not say, *“Be holy toward those who are being holy toward you.”* The Lord does not say, *“Try to be holy.”* The Lord says,

“Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” No exceptions. No excuses! No holes in the holiness!

Our friend Jim Simpson tells of an Orkney minister during the Second World War who was asked to make an announcement to his congregation about the formation of a darning circle to repair the socks of servicemen. And so he did, and then the congregation stood to sing the opening hymn: *Holy, Holy, Holy!*³ The work of that darning circle to repair the holes of the servicemen’s socks was holy, holey work. In a world in which so much was unholy, it was a glimpse of the hand of God at work through the hands of those women who darned socks.

Today, as in that day, what is unholy seems to be far more apparent in our world than what is holy. Just this week we had another mass shooting in Maine – the deadliest of the 566 mass shootings in the United States this year, indiscriminate bombing of Gaza by Israel in response to the vicious attacks by Hamas and the use of civilians as human shields by Hamas in their continued attacks on Israel, bloody battles between Russia and Ukraine, the attempted arrest of a pastor in Russia who dared to pray for peace in Ukraine, and poisonous, sometimes dehumanizing rhetoric by politicians in our nation trying to prove themselves tougher than their opponents. In a world in which unholy terror seems to dominate so much of the news, we are still called to be holy – to practice that love of neighbor and welcome of immigrants and fair dealing in our business practices and provision for the poor regardless of what the rest of the world may do, or perhaps more accurately, especially in light of what the rest of the world may do!

One of the Great Ends of the Church is: *the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*. By that we mean that people should look at us in our personal lives and in our life together and say, *“That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like!”* Or to put it another way, they should look at us and recognize something of God’s mark upon us, a glimpse of something holy! Is that what you show the world – a glimpse of something holy, of someone holy? For that is who we are called to be each day and every day: the holy people of a holy God who says to us, *“BE HOLY!”* Amen

¹ Kimberly L. Clayton, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.365

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row: 1973, p.39

³ James A. Simpson, *More Holy Wit*, Gordon Wright Publishing:1990, p.52