

Robin Dodge
Holy Faith, Santa Fe
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Epiphany 7 – Year A
Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18
Psalm 119.33-40
1 Cor. 3.10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5.38-48

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After last Sunday's difficult readings that Fr. Jim handled so well, I'm happy to preach this week because, in case you missed it, the overarching theme of today's readings is "love" – just a little late for Valentine's Day, but probably just as well because we're not talking about a sentimental, emotional kind of love, but a kind of love to live by that defines us as children of God. Our reading from Leviticus talks about this kind of love. Our reading from Matthew's Gospel talks about this kind of love. Even our collect, our opening prayer, talks about this kind of love.

Hear again the qualities that the collect, our opening prayer, assigns to love or, in the words of the traditional form of the collect, to charity, remembering that faith, hope, and charity, these three abide; but the greatest of these is charity, or love. Today's collect tells us that love is a gift from God, and it's God's greatest gift to us. Love is the true bond of peace. Love is the true bond of all virtue. God has taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing. Without love we are accounted dead before God.

Why all this emphasis on love? It's because we are created in the image of God. If God is love, as we profess, then God created us in God's image for love and to love. We hear an echo of our creation in the image of God in this morning's reading from Leviticus. God says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." If God is holy, as we profess, then God created us to be holy. St. Paul says, "God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

Most of us don't think of ourselves as holy. Most of us don't want to think of ourselves as holy. Some think that holiness is too closely connected with the concept of "holier than thou," and is often equated with false or self-righteous piety. Bishop N.T. Wright, commenting on his book Simply Christian, said, "If we call the Spirit the Holy Spirit, we should expect that the Spirit will enable us to live the kind of lives that God wants us to live...Holiness is not about renouncing all the things that might make life living. It's about discovering all the things that really make life living."

In the Bible, "holy" means more than something unapproachable. It becomes a positive concept and a goal associated not only with God's nature, but also with God's desire for the people God created. That which we are not, nor can ever fully be, but which we are commanded to emulate and approximate is what the Bible calls "holy." Holiness means imitating God, living into the image of God, pursuing the life of godliness.

But how can we imitate God? The answer from this morning's reading from Leviticus is given in a series of ethical commands, summarized in the overarching command to love your neighbor as yourself. You may have heard it said that we are not called to like our neighbor, but to love our neighbor. That's because "like" is an emotion. Here, "love" is not an emotion, but an action – the term in Greek is *agape*, meaning "self-sacrificing love." "Love" here means to reach out to or befriend others in very specific ways: you don't use up everything of yours, but you share; you don't steal from someone, deal falsely with anyone, or lie to one another; you don't defraud someone or cheat them; you don't judge unjustly; you don't slander your neighbor; you

don't stand idly by when your neighbor is in danger. You love your neighbor as you love yourself because your neighbor is also created by God in God's image.

The message from this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel is similar, but Jesus takes God's commands a step further. Remember Jesus said that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law. In a series of opposing statements, Jesus contrasts the law with his own authoritative teaching that radicalizes the law. He takes what people suppose the law to be, and encourages them to surpass the letter of the law. So Jesus says, "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." Now the law did allow this kind of proportional retaliation for harm done – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – primarily as a legal deterrent against greater retaliation, but Jesus radicalizes the law to encourage his followers to show that they are of God as they love their neighbor. So Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also [so they might strike you again]; 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." (In Jesus' time, Roman soldiers could compel bystanders to carry their armor for a mile, so Jesus is encouraging going 'the additional mile.') Jesus continues, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

If that's not enough, Jesus says, "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." Actually, "love your neighbor" is from Leviticus, as you know, but nowhere in the Bible does it say, "hate your enemies." Nevertheless, Jesus takes one of God's great commandments and pushes it to the max, to love not only your

neighbor but also your enemies and those who persecute you, so that, in Jesus' words, "you may be children of your Father in heaven" – in other words, so that you may be recognized as created in the image of God as you imitate God's holiness. After all, "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"

Finally, Jesus says, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Be perfect? How can we be perfect? It's part of human nature to be imperfect – otherwise we would be God! That's right – but just as God calls us toward holiness because God is holy, so God calls us toward perfection because God is perfect. In this sense, "perfect" means more than "infallible" or "without mistake," but means whole, complete, or mature. We are called to be mature in our faith. We are called to be whole in our love of God. We are called to be complete in our love of our neighbors as ourselves. After all, if we don't have an ideal like holiness or perfection, how can we aspire to live into the image and imitation of God?

Amen.