



Do you remember the story of Jacob wrestling with a man all night long? Jacob said he would not let go until he received a blessing. The man or the angel or God – it depends upon which version of this Genesis 32 story you read, wrenched his thigh at daybreak because Jacob would not give up. Jacob received his blessing – he was re-named Israel signifying that he had wrestled with God and not been overcome. The blessing had a price, however- forever after Jacob limped.

We, too, are called to wrestle with Holy Scripture. We, too, can be forever changed if we persevere. We, too, will be changed if we truly live the life that God's Holy Word sets before us.

The reading from Leviticus is the only passage from Leviticus in our Revised Common Lectionary. That means that today Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists are each reading this same passage. We are each struggling with what this one passage out of the entire book means to us.

Leviticus is the middle book of the Torah – the teachings of Moses, as given by God, to the entire congregation of Israel. Not to one person or one of the twelve tribes of Israel – but to the whole congregation. Because Leviticus is part of the canon – or the agreed upon body of work which constitutes the whole – it is scripture with which we must wrestle.

One initial question is why this text? It sure looks like a repeat of the Ten Commandments, in slightly different language. Walter Kaiser, a commentator on the book of Leviticus,¹ acknowledges that “even the most venturesome individuals ... usually run out of enthusiasm as they begin to read this third book of the Bible.” But, he continues, “such initial discouragement may be mitigated when we realize that Leviticus reveals the character of God in important ways.”

This passage reminds me, a bit, of that sometimes opt-repeated phrase from parents who are sorely vexed by a child's incessant question: “why.” Because I said so, responds the parent. Why do we have to not strip the vineyard clear? Because I am the Lord, says God. Why do we not steal? Because I am the Lord.

But such an approach – “because I said so” – often leaves us resentful. Rather, in this passage, the Lord is setting before the congregation of Israel a vision of what life is like when we realize

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. on *Leviticus* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 994).

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; PS. 119:33-40; 1 Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23; MT. 5:38-48

that we are called to be holy. We are called to imitate God as best as we are able. We are called to create a world where all have food, where all can trust that what someone says is true and not a lie. Where we each love our neighbor and justice is blind to wealth or poverty. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The Gold Standard, if you will.

But what does it mean to be holy? How can we even approach that possibility? One way is to see these words as promise and not as punishment. God would not call us to be holy if God did not believe it is possible for us to be so. God sets before us possibilities if we accept that God is God. “I am the Lord” – I am the one in whom we are called to have our life and being we are reminded again and again.

One of the definitions of holy is to have a spiritually pure quality. Therefore, do not strip the fields clean but leave some for the poor and the alien. Remember that God led the people out of Egypt and fed them throughout the wanderings in the desert.

If we believe that God deals honestly and justly with us, then we are to model that relationship with others. Do not steal. Do not deal falsely with others. Do not lie to one another. Deal with others as God has dealt with us. “I am the Lord” – we wrestle with the text and we come away changed people.

The book of Leviticus is also known as the “Holiness Code.” It provides instructions for the priests and the priests of Israel are then to teach all the people of Israel. While some today tend to discount the instructions in Leviticus as belonging to another people – the people of Israel-and another time – prior to 1000 BC, there is another way of looking at the detailed instructions which cover all of life together.

The people of the time were beginning to consolidate into a coherent group and beginning to settle into communities rather than live a nomadic life. They had a belief system in one God which was drastically different than most of those with whom they came into contact.

The teachings in Leviticus, then, given first to the priest and then the priests to the people, was one way of establishing a common identity and reinforcing what they meant when the words “I am the Lord” are said and heard and believed. Although it is found in Deuteronomy, the Shema forms the foundation for all belief: “Hear, O Israel. The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Dt. 6:4-5).

The words of Leviticus would have been central to Jesus’ understanding of the relationship between God and God’s people. The reading from Leviticus appears in our lectionary perhaps to help us remember this. Jesus was speaking to the people of Israel who had been called to be holy because the Lord God was holy. Professor Sheldon Sorge says that if we shrug “off the burden of following the law applicable to Jews, we might also be losing sight of the blessing that Leviticus intends to lavish on God’s people.”² Our heritage comes directly through the word of God as given to Moses to give to the congregation of Israel.

² Sorge in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 362.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; PS. 119:33-40; 1 Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23; MT. 5:38-48

The Lord God, through Moses, in this section from Leviticus, is quite explicit: Do not hate in your heart anyone of your kin (Lev. 19:17). Do not hate anyone who has wrestled with God and come away changed.

The life and teachings of Jesus were firmly grounded in the Judaism of his time and place. The teachings in Leviticus are expansions, in practical terms, of the two great commandments: Love God. Love neighbor. The Psalmist petitions God to give us understanding so that we shall keep God's law and shall keep it with all our hearts (Ps. 119:34). Just as God tells Moses, the Psalmist asks God to "turn my eyes from watching what is worthless and give me life in your ways" (Ps. 119: 37).

When we judge someone in today's society, we often – either consciously or unconsciously – look to see whether what they do is consistent with what they say. "Do as I say not as I do" tells us that the person does not live an integrated, consistent life. We are less likely to trust or to believe what that person says when there is a disconnect between what they say and what they do. Kaiser holds up this passage from Leviticus as the command from God to the people of God to be consistent in what we do and what we say. "Faith", he says, "demonstrates its authority by the way it operates in the ordinary affairs of life. ... Holiness is not an optional luxury of a believer's life ... every step of life is intended to imitate God."³

Do not, therefore, be afraid to wrestle with the Word of God. Be changed through honest struggle with how the Word of God, given to Moses and then to the people of Israel and then to us, still matters and informs how we live today. Be willing to question. Be willing to doubt. Be willing to be a modern day Jacob- be transformed by God. *Amen.*

³ Kaiser, id.