**Sermon for October 29, 2023 Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18 “Reformation Three Ways”**

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

When I was younger, I used to eat at Taco Bell rather frequently. And even though I am a creature of habit and always got pretty much the same things, what continually amused and astounded me was the seemingly endless variety of new items they came up with, all of them variations on a few standard ingredients. A taco is a taco until you deep-fry a flour tortilla shell and all of a sudden, it’s a chalupa! You can hide a crispy corn tortilla inside a soft flour tortilla and put in the same stuff you put in your taco, but now it’s a crunchwrap! It is one of our human gifts, creating endless variation from a relatively small list of ingredients.

Many Chinese restaurants also feature this same idea, but present it with much less fanfare. Not a lot of extra adjectives in a Chinese menu; differing preparations of the same ingredient served together would simply be called, for example, Chicken Three Ways. If you go for dim sum, you can often have the same exact dumpling either steamed, or baked, or pan fried, or deep fried…same food over and over, pork bun four ways. When the ingredient list is short, variety of presentation makes everything more palatable.

Before we get too hungry, though, I want to remind us that today is Reformation Sunday, where we give credit to the early reformers who created the Protestant branch of our Christian family tree, often at the cost of their lives. The commonly accepted start of this world-changing separation from the Roman Catholic Church was October 31st, 1517, when a youngish priest named Martin Luther had the temerity to question Catholic doctrine and practice by comparing it to the expectations presented in Scripture. Our own John Wesley joined the fray over two hundred years after Luther got the ball rolling, and continued the reforming of hearts and souls based on scriptural mandates rather than current religious practice. And that is precisely what we are looking at this morning, my friends: ways to reform our own lives and habits that are rooted in the scriptures, which today, will take us all the way back to the priestly writings in the Torah, the book of the Levites, Romanized as Leviticus. These Levites were the tribe of Israel descended from Jacob’s third boy, Levi, and they were in charge of interpreting the ways of God to the people of God. They were the religious leaders of the infant Israel.

So…if your life needs no reform, if you are just peachy in all aspects of your relationships with God, self, and everyone else on the planet, you get to take a little nap now. But the rest of us are going to hear about reforming ourselves, three ways; and then later, I will get on my soapbox with a real-life illustration of these essential principles.

 Our teaching from the book of the Levites today begins like this: ***The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*** There ya go, pretty straightforward. God’s children need to develop holiness, need to reclaim the divine spark within them and fan it into flame. Holy living is not optional here; it is how we grow in our relatedness to God and others. It is how we demonstrate the faith we claim. And naturally enough, it was the first spiritual discipline commanded by John Wesley to his students: personal piety was how he phrased it, meaning individually-cultivated holy living. If we want to reform our lives this is a perfect starting place. St. Francis instructed *his* students to preach all the time, but only use words when necessary! The content of that individuated message is simple and clear: observable personal holiness is the best preaching one can ever experience.

 The Levitical teaching continues with the second reform we might attempt: ***You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with* justice *you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.*** This second reform we might attempt, like the first, is pretty straightforward, too; we need to behave and choose with a heart devoted to *justice.* So many words describe this key element: fairness, equity, impartiality, honesty, we could go on. You will not be surprised, student of the Scriptures that he was, that John Wesley paired his number-one-virtue, *personal piety*, with this clarion call from Leviticus: *social justice*. So one way to initiate some personal reform is through holy living, and the second way is through living and judging justly.

 I promised three ways, here is the third: ***You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*** If it seems to you that this command would require of us *both* holiness of heart *and* a thirst for justice, you are both perceptive and correct, because this last one is the glue that holds piety and justice together, and that glue is love. Paul wrote to the church at Colossae that love was like a cloak, it binds the whole outfit together. Here, we are instructed to wrap ourselves from head to toe in that cloak of love, a radiant love which then becomes our outer appearance, even masking wardrobe malfunctions in holy living or unjust choices. What does St. Peter himself say in his first letter? “Above all, love one another deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” Unlike the gospel of Pastor Dave, where it says, “Shave infrequently, because a beard covers a multitude of chins,” unlike *that*, Peter points us towards the comprehensive, enfolding nature of our greatest possession in this world – love.

So there ya go, reformation three ways. If you want to do better, be better, live better, any of these is a good place to start. Become more holy; become more fair; become more loving. The Levites nailed it, friends; this is the best advice ever.

This might be a good place to stop, but our world situation is currently in such dire need of reformation that I feel a need to get up on my soapbox and describe for you how honoring this very teaching could change literally *everything*. This soapbox has been in my posession for a long time, but you haven’t been introduced, so…

My soapbox is about us children of Abraham…you know, more than half of the religious people in the world today. I understand our three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – to be one teaching from our one God, who shared the truth through Moses, and then through Jesus, and then through Mohammed, one message bisected by time and geography. Each of the three siblings has taken their portion of the truth and claimed it to be the best, the sweetest, the truest, the most complete, blah, blah, blah. What each of us has somehow forgotten or ignored is that we are, in fact, a family, descended, not metaphorically, but *literally*, from a common father, Abraham. Our oldest sibling has the Torah, we have the Bible, and our youngest brother has the Qur’an. You can compare these three volumes of truth and find a lot of things they don’t agree on, but you will also find some astonishing similarities, and some outright repetitions. And one of those is, and probably always will be, the widest plank in my soapbox. Because ***all of us*** are called to be the revelation of God’s nature in the world, to illustrate the best way to live with our God and with one another. Light to the nations, light of the world, illumination of the holy, you can find this same idea in every holy book in myriad ways. And here is my problem: none of us take that charge seriously. I’m talking about more than half of the religious people in the entire world, friends, and *none of us* take our mandate to be the light of the world to heart.

We do, however, keep very accurate records of grudges and injustices done, trusts broken and agreements betrayed. We keep waiting for the other to step up, take the high road, be the light!, but how can we hope for that, the way we treat one another? The trauma of the Holocaust, the horror of the Munich Olympics; the repression and violence from modern Israel to modern Palestine for more than my whole lifetime, the terror of September 11th, 2001, the brutally decapitated civilians created by Hammas, and the inevitably brutal reprisals, this seemingly endless chain of indecency has robbed the world of the face of God. May I say it again? We ***all have the same mandate***, friends, to show the world the way to living in concord. And we all ignore that mandate with great vigor. Sometime, soon, enough of us have to step up and show the world the truth of our faith, not the disgusting ignoring of its commands. And near as I can tell, personal holiness, social justice, and Godly, comprehensive love are the only path forward. Our holy books are just like Taco Bell and Chinese restaurants in this regard: they take a few ingredients and present them in myriad ways. But our worlds hunger and horror will not be sated by fancy presentation; we need to actually *cook* with these sacred ingredients, nourish the world with holiness, with justice, and with love. Amen.