

Hospitality Toward Neighbor and Stranger  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10, 17-18, 33-34  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I suspect I am correct in assuming that when you decide to read the Bible, Leviticus is not your go-to book. In fact, for those who *have* decided to read the Bible and have started with Genesis, it is often the book of Leviticus that slows them down or brings their efforts to a stop.

After all, Genesis is filled with narratives, with stories full of action and adventure, romance and conflict, hope and disappointment, characters with whom we can relate and those who we love to hate. Genesis gives us the foundational stories that set up the rest of the action in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

And then comes Exodus. And again, we get narrative texts with action and adventure, with enemies and people on the run, with a strong leader and people who vacillate between wanting to follow and wanting to give up...we get to watch as the people of Israel learn how to be in unique relationship with Yahweh.

And then comes Leviticus.

Leviticus, whose introduction in the New Interpreter's Bible begins this way, "Few books of the Bible challenge modern readers like Leviticus. In fact, even the most venturesome individuals, who aspire to read through the whole Bible, usually run out of enthusiasm as they begin to read this third book of the Bible."<sup>1</sup> So, see, you are in good company if that has happened to you. Yet, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., the author of this introduction, goes on and writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Book of Leviticus" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 985.

“However, such initial discouragement may be mitigated when we realize that Leviticus discloses the character of God in important ways.”<sup>2</sup>

And so, at least occasionally, it is important for us to spend some time with Leviticus.

Before we get to today’s verses, let’s talk for just a minute about the contents and purpose of this book. Leviticus contains two major sections. Chapters 1-16 are understood to be instructions to the priests, focused on officiating and purifying, on leading worship in faithful ways that reflect God’s holiness. Chapters 17-27 are often called the Holiness Code and are directed not only at the priests, but at all the people. They give instructions on living as a particular people of God in community, and they cover a great number of topics.

All of these instructions are set within the context of a few assumptions. First, the people of Israel have a particular relationship with one particular God and are to live in ways that are different from others around them who worship other Gods. Also, it is assumed that being in relationship with God changes people, makes them different. In fact, there is a frequent refrain throughout the book saying, “be holy as God is holy.” Thirdly, it is assumed that while the people have a particular relationship with God, it is not for themselves alone, but they are meant to be a light to all nations and they have a responsibility to the people and world around them.

It is in this context that we hear today’s verses. So, let’s read them again: *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. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien; I am the Lord your God. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of*

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<sup>2</sup> Kaiser, 985.

*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 an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*<sup>3</sup>

These verses that we read today are among the verses that focus on relationships with neighbors and strangers, in the case of Israel, with those who are part of the Jewish family and those who are not, but who live among them. And in both cases, care is to be shown. In both cases, how we treat those around us is an issue of our faith; it is about not only our actions, but about God's holiness. And so, we hear a great responsibility to take care of the known poor and even the unknown or unfamiliar among us.

And, friends, this is a difficult text for us. It is generally difficult because the reality is that even though we like to be understood as generous, even though we take pride in being those who share and who care for others...we really like to do that on our own terms. We don't like to be told exactly how or how much or to whom we should give. We like to choose when we share and with whom and what it is we give. We like to decide if someone is worth our gift...we like to evaluate if a certain situation is one in which we want to share.

But here sit the words from Leviticus that simply say – leave some of what you have for whoever needs it, really for whoever would come and take it. And, then added to that, these words tell us not to worry about whether we recognize the people, whether they look like us, whether they have the appropriate documentation, but that anyone who is among us is one of us...no matter whether we know them or like them or want them there.

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10, 17-18, 33-34

And this is difficult stuff.

It is particularly difficult if we are willing to name the reality of our culture which is that we have, in so many ways, relegated decisions about the poor and those our translation calls the “alien,” but who we might instead call the immigrant – either documented or not, we have left these decisions to our elected officials. We have not only left them to be responsible for taking care of, or not taking care of, these people, but we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that these are political conversations and for many of us that means we have decided they have no place in the church.

And yet, Leviticus remains in the Bible. Jesus, who so much more frequently than we want to admit, held his public officials responsible and got involved in the politics of his day, remains in the Bible.

Friends, while we may live in a system where borders of countries are negotiated by leaders or by war...where legislation sets up structures by which people can be called citizens or can receive certain assistance...our scripture reminds us time and time again that we have a responsibility toward other people. It reminds us time and time again that regardless of borders and laws, regardless of citizenship and qualifications, people are people, and people are valued children of God. And when that is the case, then we have a responsibility toward them.

We live with a foot in each of two worlds. We live as people of faith. And we live as citizens of a particular country. And, like it or not, sometimes those identities come in conflict. But if we listen to scripture, it tells us that our first allegiance is to God.

Now Leviticus is not written as legislation for the United States of America in the year 2019. But it is the witness of the relationship between God and humanity. It is the witness of those who are within the Judeo-Christian tradition and find themselves understanding that their

relationship with God asks something of them and shapes who they are. It is the witness of those who understand that people are people and that we who have enough also have a responsibility toward those who are struggling. And it is the witness of the people of God who understand that poverty and immigration are not first and foremost political issues, but are human ones.

And so, these verses from Leviticus ask us to ask hard questions about how we treat people. They ask us to ask hard questions about how we “other” people. They ask us to ask hard questions about when our decisions are more about preserving for ourselves than showing compassion for the other. They ask us to ask hard questions about our priorities. And they ask us to be willing to be honest about the times when we would rather wear our political lenses than our faith ones...they times we would rather choose citizenship in this world over our identity as God’s people. They also ask us to remember the times in our own faith story – not least of all the story of the people of Israel settling as immigrants in Egypt during a famine and the story of infant Jesus and his parents finding protection in Egypt when their own king threatened their lives – the times when we in the Judeo-Christian tradition have been the foreigners who needed care.

If we are willing to allow our faith lenses to be our primary lenses then we have to be willing to first see the humanity of the other and to first hear the command to share what we have, to not only share grudgingly or if someone is desperate, but to set aside part of what we have...all the time...for those in need.

Leviticus tells us something about who God is and who God calls us to be. We are called to be those who see with compassion all of God’s other children and who respond, not occasionally, but as a way of life, to the needs of the poor, the immigrant, the least of God’s children. May it be so.