

October 9 – Holy People

Last Sunday we had our first Adult Ed salon – a time for learning and conversation on a particular topic. The topic for last week was vocation – how we live our lives as Christians. Part of that conversation was about our jobs for those of us still working.

Working in customer service came up in the conversation. It seems like a lot of people who work in customer service agree that people are nastier than they used to be.

It seems a little like that everywhere – it's not true of everyone of course, and maybe not even the majority. But there seems to be more meanness in general. I've got my Facebook page pretty well curated so I hardly see any meanness, but for awhile it was nauseating.

For too many, politics is more about gamesmanship and winning elections than finding solutions that work for actual people...especially vulnerable people like immigrants, poor people, people of color, people in the correctional system, sick people...you know, the people in whom Jesus said he himself could be found.

Mental health issues and substance abuse are on the rise. We all saw how the pandemic seemed to bring out the worst in us instead of that "we're all in this together" sentiment that played out for a minute at the beginning.

We are not Israel. But as Christians, we are also made a holy nation. In the first letter of Peter, we find this: ⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Almost word for word what God told Israel.

So, because of Jesus, we too are this holy nation. But what does it mean to be a holy nation in the midst of all the stuff that's going on?

Some people...including some super influential people – equate the United States with that holy nation. They say that the United States was ordained by God to be that holy nation, I think sort of in partnership with the modern-day nation of Israel.

There's a word for that – it's called Christian nationalism. Its adherents say that this is a Christian nation, a holy nation. And if we'd just get the whole nation back to its Christian roots, that would solve our problems.

There are some colorful words to describe the belief in Christian nationalism. Some of them probably shouldn't be used in a sermon. But personally, I like balderdash and poppycock.

And Christian nationalists have said some of the meanest things I've heard. Many are even white supremacists – people who essentially equate being holy and pure with being white. And an awful lot of meanness and downright evil has come from that.

I'm going to say that a holy nation ought to be less mean than the world around, not meaner.

So, what does it mean to be a holy nation? Well first, we need to say this...the holy nation from both Exodus and Peter's letter is not a geographic place with physical boundaries. The Israelites in this passage were wandering in the wilderness.

The holy nation described by Peter is a brand-new people created and joined in baptism by Christ's death and resurrection. While Israel would eventually claim a land, in Christ all national boundaries are shattered. That was perhaps not meant to be a political reality. But it is a reality for us as Christian people.

We, like ancient Israel, were to be people set apart not from the world, but for a specific purpose in the world. Our purpose as priests is to serve others and mediate between God and the nations and to pray on their behalf.

We are to be a people who reflect God's profound concern for relationship. The mark of a priestly kingdom and holy nation is the building up of relationships between people and God and between people. And that relationship was established first by God.

And as Jesus himself said, we will be known by our love. We can all think of people who claim to be Christian who are very definitely not known by their love.

But this whole business of God's commandments is not for us to look at others and see where they're wrong and what they should do about it. The purpose of God's law is to create a people whose lives reveal the love of God. The law is to be obeyed because it serves the life and well-being of all creation.

That's what Martin Luther and others called the first use of the law. For Israel, they needed a set of boundaries and guidelines to learn how to live in their new-found freedom. Otherwise, they likely would have just fallen back into familiar ways...the oppressed turns into the oppressor. You see it happen.

So, let's walk through the commandments and talk about what it might mean for us to be a true holy people, set apart to reveal God in our time and place.

You shall have no other gods and you shall make no idols. We do have a sort of pantheon – a collection of gods. There's the god of wealth – patterned after the Roman goddess Juno

Moneta. There's Jupiter, the god of power. There's our idolization of sports – the goddess of victory, Nike, now pronounced Nike and turned into a shoe. That one has a little Bacchus thrown in – the god of over-the-top partying.

But our real idol is a distorted image of the actual God. That distorted image is a god of violence and vengeance, primarily directed at the other people we think deserve it. But it's equally an idol when that divine hatred is directed at ourselves.

Do not use God's name in vain. We always think of swearing or things like the OMG text. But it's more about using God's name to justify evil. It was done with slavery for centuries. But other groups have been at the stinging end – God hates fags may be a blatant abuse of God's name we can all condemn, but subtler ways of saying the same thing are equally damaging to people that God in fact loves.

Remember the Sabbath day. In our society there are two angles to this. One is our own need for rest and downtime. It might especially be about disconnecting from news and social media and connecting with the actual people in our lives. But it's also a justice issue. The commandment was about letting all workers have a time of rest. In a later rendition of the commandment, even the land is to be rested at intervals.

Honor your father and mother. For some of us, this may be obvious. But what does it mean if you've been abused or neglected by one or both parents? Honor your father and mother then may be taking steps toward your own healing and breaking a cycle of intergenerational violence.

It's also been extended, both in scripture and by Martin Luther, to cover other authority. But not all people in authority. Respect for authority has more to do with respect for the role someone in a particular position of authority is supposed to play. When that authority is twisted into use for evil, respect for that position means calling the evil what it is and working toward restoration of proper authority.

Do not kill. Again, both scripture and Luther expanded this to also mean do what is needed to allow life to flourish. This has important implications that are beyond the scope of this sermon. But as we think about sticky issues like abortion and both of the lives involved, as we think about guns, war, poverty, racial inequality, and so on, this commandment is in play.

Do not commit adultery. The meaning for this probably hasn't really changed. Be faithful to the one you've pledged to be faithful to.

You shall not steal. OK, we probably think that's obvious. But in a nation where the gap between the rich and everyone else is obscene and keeps growing, we may need to rethink our approach to taxes and the like.

You shall not bear false witness. I mean I don't even know where to start with this. But maybe the number one thing we need to do is be willing to have our own beliefs challenged. If where you get your information never challenges something you were sure was true, you're not getting real information. And remember that the people with whom you disagree are also God's beloved.

Don't covet someone else's spouse and don't covet stuff you don't have. Part of this is about relationship – it's about being happy for other people and their happiness.

But it's also about greed. We really don't probably need an awful lot of the stuff we have. How can living more simply help not only us but other people and the environment.

If we, as a holy people, did all those things really well, we really might be a people who really do serve the life and well-being of all creation. And that might spread.

But that brings us to the second use of the law. Which is to convict us. God's law forces us to see where we have fallen short of our call to be a holy people.

And then, we turn toward Jesus...the recognition of our failure drives us to the cross and our participation in Christ's death and resurrection. That is the true mark of a holy nation...a people through whom the transformative power of Christ works to recreate the world as God intended.