

Sunday, February 20, 2011: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Here are texts that say to the church: "You are holy."

by [Edwin Searcy](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

My earliest memories of worship are of singing: "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty!" I didn't know what the word *holy* meant, but I knew that it was associated with God. "Only thou art holy, merciful and mighty." God and only God was holy.

So it is a bit confounding to open Leviticus and find that Moses is to tell the Israelites that *they* are holy. Then we find Paul telling a little Corinthian church made up of the "low and despised in the world" that it is a "holy temple." The church of my upbringing has been careful to leave holiness to God. We are keenly suspicious of a "holier than thou" attitude. Say "righteous" and we instinctively add the prefix "self." We don't talk about holiness very much, yet here are texts that say to the church: "You are holy."

I suspect that the discomfort about holiness in my denomination, the United Church of Canada, comes not only from fear of the sin of pride but also from the sin of sloth. We are called to be witnesses to God's coming reign, but we'd rather fit in than stand out. To say that God is holy is to say that God is other, that God is not us, that God is odd. As a child I had no inkling that singing "Holy, holy, holy" was the equivalent of singing "Odd, odd, odd." It wasn't in our ecclesial DNA to be odd.

Yet each of this Sunday's texts proclaim that the church is to be the distinctive witness of a people who mirror the holiness of God. In the Holiness Code of Leviticus we dig into the roots of the prophets' concern for the marginalized. The Lord says that the vocation of a holy people is to "love your neighbor as yourself." We have imagined that this neighbor love is a universal human inclination. What, after all, is so odd about loving your neighbor? But then we read the specifics: no seeking revenge, no bearing grudges, no showing partiality, no profiting at another's expense, no keeping your crops or produce or profit to yourself. We don't have to

look very far in the church to discover a grudge held here, special favors shown there, secret longings for revenge in our hearts and tight fists keeping watch on the budget purse strings.

Then Jesus ups the ante: "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." Jesus calls an odd people into existence. Some find Jesus and his community offensive. They are enemies of Jesus and of the church. The church that shaped me did not spend a lot of time on this passage. We were confused about enemies. On the one hand, it was somehow assumed that a true Christian would not have any enemies. On the other hand, we knew who our enemies were; often they were other churches that we did not approve of or agree with. But making enemies in the neighborhood because we took following Jesus seriously enough to cause offense was not in our repertoire. Yet there Jesus is, out ahead of us, preparing us for holiness by commanding us to love the enemies that we are in the process of making by following him.

I've learned that the best place to practice enemy love is in my own congregation. Jesus always manages to call someone into this little flock who takes offense at what I say or how I go about my calling. There was a time when I wished and even prayed that these enemies would decide to move on. Then I realized that as soon as this happened, Jesus would call someone else to come and be my enemy. He knows that I am not good at loving my opponents, theological or otherwise. I am not well formed in the practice of enemy love. I struggle with the bad habit of bearing false witness when describing their position. But this is no excuse. After all, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that enemy love is the thing that will set his holy people apart from gentile neighbors who are as fully capable of loving their loved ones as you and me.

Last but not least comes Paul, who knows that constructing a community on the foundation of Jesus Christ the great enemy lover is a long-term project in which many skilled builders take part. He says that God's holy people look like fools in the world. It is his way of saying that Jesus' church is odd. We had hoped that our neighbors would think of us as wise, up-to-date and in touch with the times. We are learning, instead, to hope that God will think of us as holy.