

“Faith in Action” 2015
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-12 James 2:1-5, 8 15-18

Every culture & society has its own rules and customs of etiquette,
and before our group left for a seminary course in Ghana,
all the students & professors prepared for several weeks
by learning about West African culture and customs.

On that trip, we didn’t stay in any fancy hotels,
but were welcomed as guests in some pretty remote places,
and we really wanted to honor and respect our hosts.

For example, when a group in Ghana meets with another group
each person greets and shakes hands with every other person.
In Ghana they wave greetings with the right hand only,
the left is an insult, so I would keep my left hand in my pocket
to avoid that mistake when I greeted people in a village.

**Coming from our American culture and lifestyle,
I had a lot to learn about etiquette and African traditions.**

* When the former slaves were freed from Egyptian bondage,
they had to adjust and learn to live together in community
as a free people; chosen, equipped and called by God.

Having lived through many generations as slaves in Egypt,
one of the lessons of surviving their bondage,
had been not to get involved or care about other people,
but better to ignore the needs of those around them.

Also, a slave lives intimidated by fear and the threat of violence.
In contrast,
the people of God are motivated by grace and gratitude,
and by their ardent desire to live and grow
within the blessings and purposes of the Lord.

**These former slaves had a great deal to learn
before they would be ready to settle in the Promised Land.**

So during the long wilderness journey,
God provided them with manna to eat every day and guided them,
teaching them to trust and rely on God and His promises.

God also gave them commandments, as directions and instructions
to teach them how God's people can live together well
by attending to the needs of **all** within a caring community.

These commandments were not intended as a burden to trip them up,
but were **God's gift & guide toward good and meaningful living,
as the way to live into God's promises, purpose & blessings.**

This living as God intends is explained in Leviticus 26:13,12, & 19:1-2;

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt ... and I will walk among you,
and will be your God, and you shall be my people. 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.

Sometimes we understand the word "holy" in a way too spiritualized because it's really more down to earth and practical than that.

Simply put, to be holy is to be set apart to be used by God, to be set apart to accomplish God's will and purpose.

For instance, that Table is "holy" as it's set apart for Communion. It's still a table. It is the appropriate use that makes it holy.

So having been brought out from Egyptian bondage by the Lord,
I will be your God,
and I have chosen to set you apart to be my people...

... so that in responding to the Lord's gracious love and blessings
you too will take care of the poor, the powerless and needy,
and so you will live together with integrity and justice,
providing for the widow, the orphan and the alien;
for I am your God
and you are my people chosen to do this for me.

A barefoot little boy
was standing outside a cobbler's shop, shivering in the cold.
A woman waiting for her bus noticed him standing there.
So she went into the shoe store and made a purchase.

When she came out and handed him some new sox and a pair of shoes,
and the little boy asked her, "Lady, are you God?"
She answered, "No, but I know him,
and he wants me to show you that he cares about you."

In Leviticus, God is saying,
those who have received my gracious love and blessings
are called to be holy by being merciful & compassionate,
so that people will ask, "are you of God?";

so that by the way you live, they will see my love and holiness
as you live serving together in compassionate community...
... as an expression of the grace you received from me.

In the Leviticus 19 passage, God makes some very specific demands,
demonstrating and illustrating his concern
for ethics and social justice in ordinary life... vs. 9-10

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.

It is a clear instruction, don't be stingy when you harvest,
don't gather every bit of grain or pick every single grape ---
but leave some for the poor and the alien among you.

The bulk of your crop, the just fruits of your labor,
those are yours to gather, and to do with as you wish;
but along the edges and any that drops to the ground,
let that remain for those who are less fortunate.

This is not a free handout to the lazy or the irresponsible,
but it is allowing those without to gather for themselves.

You don't need every bit of everything you can possibly produce;
so leave some excess to those with no land of their own,
to those whose own crops have failed,
for those who are unable to grow for themselves.

Through their own efforts at gathering for themselves,
they can labor to provide for their own families.

Through their participation in the hard work of harvesting,
they keep their self-respect and sense of achievement,
while you are helping them to feed their families.

Because I am the Lord your God, this is how you are to live,
with justice and integrity, with compassion and generosity,
to be a society that takes care of one another in need
for your religion and social ethics, are inseparable.

**We can no more live in God's grace and not show compassion,
then we could squeeze a handful of jelly,
and not have some of it leak & squirt out through our fingers.**

Because we have freely received from God's grace and blessings,
**we know that we are loved and sustained by our God,
that truth permeates and seeps into all areas of our lives.**

Our treatment of other persons does make a difference to God.
It does matter to God whether or not we are hospitable and open,
if we are caring, supportive and helpful to those in trouble.

The James text also deals with that concern for justice, vs. 1

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

**There is a critical connection
between our faith, and what we do with it because of it;
between our spirituality and what we do
about others in need, others we could assist.**

Remember, I am your God who loves and redeems you,
so let the world know of my love, my purpose and blessings
through the love and compassion that you live
by demonstrating my grace toward your neighbor...

... which is exactly as Jesus describes and commands,
on the night of the Last Supper, as recorded in John 13:34-35

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In agreement, and in a very practical example James asks, vs. 14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James is not demanding that we can do this on our own strength,
but that we do act and behave based on what we truly believe.

The Good News is that God's own gracious presence and power
make it possible to live generously as James describes.

**** Now this is important: James isn't suggesting that in any way
our good works are necessary or even contribute to saving us.**

But how faithfully we are living out God's gift of our salvation
is something that we need to think about as Paul wrote: 1 Cor. 11:28
Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

He's saying that coming to the Lord's Table is a good time and place,
for us to consider and self-examine how we are living,
**are we really living out this faith that we believe?,
the promises and hope we have through Jesus Christ?**

One of the measures of our faith, the authenticity of our faith,
and a test of our church as a faith community of Christians,
is in how well we treat one another, and the stranger?

We're called to live & reflect God's own gracious kindness & mercy.
It is God's command to share with compassion and generosity
to be a caring community, showing justice and integrity,
to be a people who take care of one another ...

... for how can we claim that we walk with Jesus as our Lord,
and yet think & behave in ways that are miserly or discriminate
against those others who are also created in God's image?

As Jesus explained in the parable of Matthew 25:40

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,
you did it to me."

So, how does our Christian hospitality and openness stack up,
and does it reflect the gracious love & welcome of Jesus Christ?

**So what do my words, my deeds, my attitudes and my secret thoughts,
reveal about the truth and progress of my journey of faith?**

This isn't about wallowing in guilt or crushed by regret and shame,
but it is asking in faith,
where am I most in need of God's transforming power?,
and could I somehow be blocking or hindering
the good that God might accomplish through me?

It is here at the Lord's Table as we are reminded once again
of God's abiding mercy, love and grace in Jesus Christ,
it's a good place to ask,
"am I allowing God's grace
to have its full healing effect on my life?"