

## Holier than Now

At 6:00 a.m. most Wednesdays, I can be found in a room full of rather sleepy people who, for the sake of their health, have dragged themselves out of bed, donned cotton or spandex, and driven to an “exercise studio.” (We’re not supposed to call it a gym.) When they arrive, they check their names off a list, fill up their water bottles, and take their places on contraptions called “rowers.”

A “rower” is a mechanism designed to simulate the motion of propelling an actual boat through actual water, but without getting wet or risking capsizing. I’m pretty sure the basic design originated during the Spanish Inquisition and was an effective tool for eliciting confessions – more effective, even, than thumb screws or the rack.

Having seated ourselves upon this contraption and having strapped in our feet, my fellow galley slaves and I then receive directions from our instructor, whose name is Laurel, and who in real life is a very nice person. Laurel tells us how fast to row. That’s called the “stroke rate” (which seems to me as a very unfortunate phrase to be using in that context.) And she also tells us how far to row – how many meters to cover. (Yes, it’s true, we don’t actually go anywhere, but the machine supplies a digital readout which tells how many *virtual* meters we are covering.)

Laurel often gives us what she terms an “aspirational goal.” “Your aspirational goal,” she’ll say, “is to cover 1,000 meters in 4 minutes.” She’ll then turn up the volume on the music and shout, “Row.”

What Laurel doesn’t tell us is that to reach that aspirational goal, we would need to be fit enough to qualify for the U. S. Olympic team. To me, Laurel’s aspirational goal feels more like an invitation to a near-death experience – an *expirational* goal.

So far, none of us in the class has expired, but most Wednesdays I come pretty close.

In Biblical Greek, the equivalent of Laurel's "aspirational goal" is the word "telos." Telos means "end" or "goal" – that to which we aspire. The first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* famously asks, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

A life lived to God's glory is, in Biblical terms, "holy." "Holiness," however, is not something most people aspire to these days. I suspect that most people would not like to be thought of as "holy." "Holy" is a term we reserve for monks in monasteries or people like Mother Theresa or the Dali Lama. Ordinary people don't get to be called "holy," nor would they welcome that appellation.

Preachers in my father's day were sometimes called "Holy Joe's." That wasn't meant as a compliment. It meant a guy with a stained-glass voice and an air of sanctimoniousness – the pompous, preening kind of preacher who fancies himself and looks down his nose at everybody else.

Anybody with a lick of common sense knows that people who aspire to holiness never achieve it, due to the fact that we are all human. Jesus himself knew this, and was quick to point out the hypocrisy of those who tithed the mint, dill, and cumin, but neglected the weightier matters of the law.

Nobody today wants to be thought of as "holier than thou," but the fact remains that all of God's Covenant People – Jews and Christians alike – are called to be holy.

Why? *Because we serve a holy God.* Our reading from the Book of Leviticus doesn't leave much room for misunderstanding: **You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy . . .**

Our end in life – our telos, our aspirational goal – is to reflect the holiness of God. Not to *be* God, but to be holy as God is holy. The idea is that, as God keeps company with us, and we keep company with God, we will grow to value what God values and even to see the world as God sees it. Holiness is not something you achieve. It's something you grow into over time.

The old-fashioned theological term for this growth toward holiness is "sanctification." Our Reformed ancestors had a striking way of talking about this process. They called it "improving our baptism." The idea was that, while baptism is

the sign and seal of God's unmerited grace and love – something we could never earn – the Christian life is the hard work of loving God back. As we work on that, we get better and better at it -- improving our baptism.

Thus God's command, "You shall be holy," is also God's promise. "You shall be holy." We aren't there yet, but by grace, we can head in the right direction.

There have been a lot of protest marches lately – a big one in Washington and a soggy but spirited one in Tallahassee. Many people in this sanctuary took part in one or the other. If you've ever been on one those marches, you'll know that someone will call out,

"Show me what democracy looks like."

Immediately the crowd will shout back, "This is what democracy looks like."

If you want to know what holiness looks like, read the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Leviticus. There the Lord God lays it out in concrete terms for Moses and all of God's children. What does holiness look like? It looks like this:

When you reap the harvest of your crop, you don't cut down every single stalk of grain. You leave the edges of your field unharvested, so that hungry people – people like Ruth and Naomi – can come along and glean some food for themselves.

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.**

When the grapes you're picking from your vineyard fall to the ground, don't pick them up. Leave them for the poor and the alien.

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.**

When seasonal workers labor in your fields, don't wait until the next morning to give them their pay. They'll need that money at day's end so that they can feed their families. Pay them promptly.

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.**

Don't steal from your neighbors. Don't cheat. Don't **revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind**. In other words, don't mock and demean people with disabilities. (Can you imagine a person doing such a thing?)

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.**

Practice justice; don't be partial to the poor or deferential to the rich. Don't **go around as a slanderer among your people**. Don't **profit by the blood of your neighbor**.

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.**

Does any of this sound familiar? Well, how about this: **You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

Why? **Because I am the Lord your God.** Because that's what holiness looks like. Holiness isn't about being so fixed on heaven that you're of no earthly use. Holiness is about being God-like in love for neighbor.

When it comes right down to it, holiness isn't so hard to spot. Most of us know exactly what it looks like. We just don't always see it in the mirror.

John Carlin, in his biography of Nelson Mandela, tells how, after his long imprisonment and rise to the highest office in the land, Mandela treated his former jailers with dignity. He encouraged those who worked for President de Klerk to stay on and work in his administration. Instead of vanquishing his enemies, Mandela counted them as neighbors in a post-Apartheid South Africa.

Toward the conclusion of his, book Carlin writes, "[Mandela] succeeded because he chose to see good in people who ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have judged to be beyond redemption. . . Instead of eliminating the enemy and starting from zero, the enemy was incorporated into a new order deliberately built on the foundations of the old. Conceiving of his revolution not primarily as the destruction of apartheid but, more enduringly, as the unification and reconciliation of all South Africans, Mandela broke the historical mold."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "[Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation](#)

Nelson Mandela was not a Christian, and he certainly never claimed to aspire to holiness. But he did aspire to love his neighbors – including the neighbors who had abused him. Viewed through the lens of scripture, holiness and love of neighbor look very much alike.

God doesn't love us any less when we fail to be holy, but holy is what we are called to be, and the Bible is crystal clear about what holiness looks like.

Last Sunday we left this sanctuary singing, "Lord, make us more holy until we meet again." If you aren't any holier today than you were last week, it's time to adjust your aspirational goal.