

Leviticus 19

Week 5

Life Comes Through the Food

The metaphor of a crowded table can take us a lot of places. Certainly, one of the places it takes us is to a big dining room table, with chairs squeezed together all the way around it. We might imagine that the chairs are so close together that it's difficult to even pull them out to sit down. And maybe we don't have much elbow room as we serve one another from the big bowls of mashed potatoes and dressing, and the big platter of turkey or ham. There is laughter and talking, children interrupting, and stories about love and life. Someone knocks at the door and when they walk in, there is a loud welcome and the whole table shifts to squeeze in one more chair. "I want a house with a crowded table and a place by the fire for everyone."

This song that "Brown Sugar" sung this morning is a favorite of this congregation and I think that is so for two reasons. The first is that it has a food theme. And we like food...a lot. There are some of you in this room that can be lured into doing just about anything if I say, "There will be tacos." Or, "There will be ice cream." I love that about you. And the other reason I think we love this song is its strong theme of welcome and inclusion, "...a place by the fire for everyone." Food and welcome. I feel like those words could be our tagline: DCC: Where there is always food, and you are always welcome.

Today's text from Leviticus gives us an opportunity to talk about both food and welcome. But first, let's talk specifically about Leviticus. I've heard Leviticus described as the book in which our resolutions to read through the entire Bible go to die. Admittedly, it can be tedious, but its contents are important, especially in its original context. The setting for the book is the tent of meeting in which Moses sits, awaiting the Holy's instructions for Israelites who were preparing to enter Canaan, the land of promise. A good portion of Leviticus consists of laws specifically aimed at the priests, who were from the tribe of Levi, which is where Leviticus gets its name. These laws are called the Holiness Code. There are laws about how sacrifice is to be made and how to maintain purity, among other temple-related things. Following these laws ensured the Holy had a fitting place to dwell among them.

But chapters 17-26 of Leviticus shift from the Holiness Code for priests to the laws for all the people because even the people who were not priests had a role to play in the welfare of Israel. They were transitioning from their enslavement to Pharaoh to being liberated people, in covenant with God. They were launching a whole new life that included all of them, religious leaders and lay people. This new life, with its new commands set all the covenant people apart from their neighbors.

These community laws include detailed instructions about how to maintain the holiness of the land. Dr. Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship, at Saint Paul School of Theology, describes the role all the Israelites had in creating a dwelling place for the Holy like this, “If all who reside in Canaan, according to the author of Leviticus [this material], reflect holiness to one another, then it is as if a holy aura accumulates to give shelter to all those creatures who dwell in that land. But if the people do not live into the holiness they are called to, the whole land is polluted.”¹ And like all of us, the Divine isn’t a fan of living amid pollution.

The theology or ideology represented here is foundational, not only to being Jewish or Christian, but to being human, humans who desire the common good for all of creation. Basically, the way we treat each other and the earth matters. The world will be better or worse based on our relationships with one another and with our neighbors. From a theological point of view, as reflections of God in this world, our actions broadcast to the whole world what we believe about God. If you don’t remember anything else about this sermon, remember that: As reflections of God in this world, our actions broadcast to the whole world what we believe about God.

Let’s talk about the common good for a minute. In verse 10, farmers and vineyard owners are given harvest instructions. They are to leave some of what they have grown around the edges of their fields and their vineyards. They are to leave it for the ones who are vulnerable to eat. This included people who were poor, immigrants, widows, and the ones just passing through. It was the responsibility of the growers of the food to be sure even the people who couldn’t pay for the

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-leviticus-191-2-15-18-4>, accessed 2/18/23.

food had something to eat. To put it simply, the law of the land was that everyone eats. Eating was not a privilege afforded to people with money or land. Eating was and is a necessity for all people. Everyone must eat and, according to the text, it is up to the people of God to make sure that happens.

A few years ago, having decided to focus their efforts on food insecurity and shelter, the Outreach Commission hosted a meeting with community partners who were doing the work of making sure everyone has enough to eat. We met here at the church to learn about what each organization was doing and to try to understand where the gaps in services were. What we learned was that on weekends, especially Sundays, help with food was scarce. Coincidentally, there was a small group of people at DCC who wanted to start a Sunday food ministry. That ministry morphed into what we know as Lunches with Love.

When Lunches with Love began, a group made lunches and some of the youth and their leaders loaded up the church van and offered sack lunches to people they encountered. We kind of had an idea about where they could connect with the people who really needed food. And later, we learned that our neighbors at Torrey Place could benefit from a shared meal, so we began to focus on providing lunch for them once a month. We do that on the 3rd Sunday of every month, which happens to be today. I will use this opportunity to encourage you to get involved in this very hands-on way of living out the Holy's command that everyone eats. In addition, Lunches with Love is also one of the ways we fulfill the general directive given in verse 18 and elsewhere in our sacred texts, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

How else do we love our neighbors according to Leviticus? We must be honest in our business dealings — don't put your finger on the scale when you're weighing your grain (verses 35-36). You must not defraud your neighbor or slander him (verses 13, 16). You must render just judgments (verse 15). We must not be petty by taking revenge or holding a grudge. In short, "loving your neighbor as yourself" means not just refraining from hurting your neighbor, but also seeking your neighbor's good and working for it.

In its original context in Leviticus, the term "neighbor" probably refers to a fellow Israelite. Thousands of years later, though, Jesus, a good Jew, expanded the definition of neighbor with the story of the Good Samaritan when he asked his

audience who the neighbor in the story was, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? The answer, “The one who showed him mercy.” But even within this chapter in Leviticus, way before Jesus, a more universal understanding of neighbor is suggested. In verses 33-34, we read, “When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” And there it is, the clear welcome theme.

In Leviticus, amid the tedious rules, we read about the kind of life in community God desired for God’s beloveds: a life of abundance, shared goods, and inclusion. A community that values what is best for all people, a community based on we and not me. A land in which the inhabitants understand that when their neighbors have hope for the future, there is hope enough for everyone. Today we wrap up the SAD: Shining a Light on the Blahs series with the reminder that the blahs of anxiety and depression have a way of causing us to turn inward, to fixate on all the things that are wrong in our own lives. But even when we feel awful, if we can get ourselves to turn our focus outward, to bringing light and life to our neighbors, very often we find that light and life for ourselves.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.” According to an April 2021 story in Forbes, science indicates that Dr. King was right. Research published by a team of psychologists at the University of Missouri-Columbia suggests that King’s words are as true today as they were a half-century ago — that our own happiness is, in large part, influenced by the kindness and generosity we show to others. “Americans are guaranteed the right to ‘pursue happiness’ for themselves,” say the researchers... “But might they be better off if they pursued happiness for others?”² So the study compared the two strategies and found overwhelming that the second pursuit (seeking happiness for others) brings more personal happiness than the first.

The researchers asked participants to engage in a series of behaviors and thought experiments that pitted acts of self-directed happiness against those aimed at improving the happiness of others. The participants were asked to rate their level of happiness following the activities. Across the board, the ones who engaged in

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/traversmark/2021/04/26/happiness-comes-from-making-others-feel-good-rather-than-ourselves-according-to-a-new-study/?sh=5d6afda32fd9>, accessed 2/18/23.

activities aimed at improving the happiness of others rated their own level of happiness, having contributed to their neighbor's happiness, higher than the ones who did things to make themselves happy. When asked why this might be true, researchers explained, "...it has to do with our basic psychological need for "relatedness," or feeling close to others...an attempt to make another person happy inspires feelings of closeness which, in turn, explains why people end up feeling happy themselves..."

Human beings were wired for community. We need people in our lives who are on our side, who will help us when we need it, who show up, even when we don't know to ask. My hope for this series was that it would remind you that you are worth taking care of and that when you feel sad, anxious, depressed, and alone, there are some things you can do to take care of yourself and help you feel better. And if those things don't help, there are people who you can reach out to who would love the opportunity to help. Let us all commit to seeking the well-being of ourselves and our neighbors, to being love and light to each other and to being a safe place to land both as individuals and as a community. You are loved, dear ones, more than you know.

Amen.