

Epiphany 7, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It was tempting today
to just preach last week's sermon again
and see if you noticed!
Because what we have
is another portion, another eight verses
of Psalm one hundred nineteen,
the longest chapter of the bible, one hundred seventy six verses in all.
This time
all eight verses
begin with the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet,
the letter ה (heh).

And the theme is similar to last week:
eight things about following the way of God.
But what is different this week
is how the verses we read from psalm 119
connect with our other readings.
It's almost as if the other readings
are a commentary on the psalm,
or perhaps the psalm is a commentary on them.
And what they have in common is this:
a call to holiness.

It begins in our reading from the Old Testament,
from Leviticus,
where God speaks to Moses
and tells him to tell the people,
"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

Those words are echoed
in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter three,
when he writes,
"God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

And then again in our gospel reading, from the Sermon on the Mount,
"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Which, if you read the verse in the Greek that it was originally written in,
is something more like

be complete, be whole
as I am complete and whole.

Holiness
is the theme of our readings,
and not just God's holiness
but our own holiness.
We are called to be holy
as God is holy.
We are called
to live our lives
in a way that echoes
the God
that we worship.

And perhaps, before we get to our psalm,
we should ask the obvious question,
"Why?"
Why should we
be holy?

And one answer is
"Because God said so."

But I suspect
that that's not quite enough
for most of us.
It just sounds like a parent,
answering the fifty-third question from a child, "why."
"Because I say so."

And another answer is
because maybe if we are holy enough
God will like us
and let us into heaven.
Except scripture is clear.
It's nothing we do
that gets us there.
It's all God - God in Christ
who died for us,
and by grace
welcomes us.
We just have to receive that gift.

No, the answer is, that we are to be holy
because as the people of God,
followers of Christ,
we are invited
to be like him.
To allow him
to live in us,
to be changed,
not to win God's favor
but to reflect our love and thankfulness.
And because as we become more like the God we worship
we become like mirrors,
reflecting God
so that others
see God
through us.

Yesterday
I went to the funeral of a friend
who had been on the staff of the Diocese of New Jersey.
who died from complications of chemotherapy.
Cynthia
was a woman of great elegance, grace and courage.
She did graphic design and communications.
She loved beautiful things.

But above all
she loved God
and did everything
to follow her Savior.
In the sermon, her priest said,
she always wanted to be her best self.
That is, she constantly tried
to do her very best
in the name of God.
She was generous with her time
and her money
and her words.
She constantly tried to live up to way
that God had created her.
One of her doctors said after her death,
"Cynthia moved through life with astounding grace and light."

It was the grace and light of God, the holiness of God
that people could see
reflected in her.

Be holy
as I am holy, says God.

And so we come to our psalm.
“Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,” says the psalmist,
“and I shall keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law;
I shall keep it with all my heart.”
Make me go in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.
Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.
Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless;
give me life in your ways.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which you make to those who fear you.
Turn away the reproach which I dread,
because your judgments are good.
Behold, I long for your commandments;
in your righteousness preserve my life.

Immediately we notice
the shift in tone from the beginning of the psalm
that we read last week.
The first three verses
talked about the law, the word, the way
of God;
it all seemed rather abstract and impersonal.
Even when the psalmist began to speak directly to God,
there was still a kind of detachment
at least in comparison
with the verses we read
today.

But today’s reading
is personal.
It’s a heartfelt
prayer.
And we can see in it

the psalmist's deep longing
to follow God,
to do whatever
it takes
to become closer to God.
It is an invitation to God
to be at work in the psalmist's
life.

And it provides for us
a model of prayer,
prayer that is not simply
asking God to help people who are in need
or even giving thanks to God,
but prayer that is an emotional outpouring,
prayer that invites God
into our lives.

And it invites God in
in a particular way.
The psalmist wants to be taught
how to be live
as God wants,
how to be holy
as God is holy.

And the answer, the answer to the prayer
is found in our other readings.
Not just the theme
of being holy
but actual
practical
advice.

In Leviticus
it begins with how we deal with the poor and aliens,
that is, people who are in need and people who are immigrants with no land to support them.

When you harvest, don't strip everything from the plants. Leave something around the edges, so
that people who are in need
can pick it.

And while we could take this literally - give some of those mountains of zucchinis you grow every summer
 aside for the food pantry -
 it's about more than this.
 It's about not stripping everything you can out of your livelihood for yourself.
 It might be
 about not using the whole of your income,
 about limiting your spending and even your saving
 so you have some left
 to give to those who need it more than you do.
 And across our society,
 it might even mean something as radical as limiting our work hours, and learning to live with a
 slightly lower income,
 so that that work and the income that goes with it
 can be given to those who can't find a job.
 It's about living as a society
 in a way that is best for all of us.

And Leviticus continues
 with advice on how to deal with those around us.
 Don't defraud them, don't cheat them, don't even just fudge things a little for your benefit.
 Pay your bills on time.
 Pay your taxes.
 Be fair, be just.
 Don't treat some people differently
 because they are rich
 or because they are poor,
 because they might have something to give you
 or because they have nothing.

Be careful
 how you speak.
 Don't say things
 that aren't true -
 and don't repeat things
 that you aren't 100 percent sure of.
 Don't make assumptions about people.
 Don't take vengeance - which I suspect most of us don't think we do - but also don't bear a
 grudge - which is also a small kind of vengeance. Let it go.

But it's not all about negatives.
 When we turn to Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount,
 he takes it further.

Love one another.

And love those
who don't even love you.

If someone hits you
don't hit back.
If someone takes something
give them more.
If someone demands you do something
do it, and even more.
Be generous.

And then the kicker.

Love you enemies.
Not just your family,
not just your friends,
not just the people who love you.

Love the people who hate you.
The people who are out to destroy you.
Love them.

It sounds crazy, doesn't it?

But it's all about
being like God.

Being like God
who loves us,
even when we are at our most unlovable.

And imagine what it would be like
if we all followed this!
Imagine what people would say.
those people over there at St James, they're crazy.
They have no common sense.
They don't pay enough attention
to looking after themselves.
They keep giving things away.
And they love, they love the people

who hurt them most.
They're crazy.

Or would they say,
see those people over there at St James?
They're crazy.
But you know, they're good crazy.
They're so generous.
They care for people.
They love people.
I wonder what makes them like that?
Maybe I should go take a look.

A call to holiness.
Not because by it
God will love us more.
But by it
we - and those who meet us -
will love God more.

Be holy
as I am holy
says the Lord.