

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

This message this morning might be labeled: something old, something new, something borrowed, something ... green. That's not a political statement on green—I want to suggest the promise of springtime exhilaration which we are about to experience, the power of new life after a long, exceedingly cold winter!

If we were back in the 70's I'd invite you to sing with me: *What a wondrous time is spring, when all the trees are budding. The birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming. That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it. You'll want to sing; it's fresh like spring. You'll want to pass it on...*

Hear again what was just read to us: *You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy... Turn my eyes from looking at vanities... That I may keep and observe your law with my whole heart... In your righteousness give me life... Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? God's temple is holy and you are God's temple... Love your enemies so that you may be children of your Father in heaven... Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

I have just asked you to hear for a second time selections from each of this morning's lessons, and I ask you: in these verses did you hear commands or promises? I trust you heard both. *You shall be holy.* Let's take that as promise, a gift available to all!

Our scriptures for this morning seem to announce the availability of holiness. Choose life, God's life for us—His life, His holiness, wholeness, mature personhood! *The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe this good news.* It was Jesus' message then. It is still his message: (Matthew 5:48) *Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect...*

George Buttrick writes: *Be perfect? It's like demanding higher mathematics from a child who has not yet mastered the two times table.* He adds, *The whole Sermon on the Mount traces perfection.* But it's all in the context of a Father's love. He observes that 17 times the word "father" is mentioned. And I remember what John Redhead preached years ago: God's love is like that of a father whose love never lets us go, whose love never lets us down, and whose love never lets us off! Our total wellbeing is His loving concern.

Again, I remind you of Leviticus 19: *You shall be holy.* I wish we could take time here for congregational dialogue. I'd love to know your response. What comes first to your mind when you read or hear the word "holiness"—that is, as it applies to human beings?

Holiness—I heard the word a lot when I was a kid. It's not exactly a hot item these days. Seldom do we hear it preached from the pulpit, at least not in the way I remember it preached when I was a kid. The related verses most often cited were those from 1 John: *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

I am so old that I can still remember the most frequently quoted Biblical text by traveling evangelists who came to our Fort Wayne, IN, Free Methodist church. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you holy, through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.* That clearly was a promise.

I am sorry to report to you that what came through with those verses was an emotional and revivalistic intensity that I rejected in my early adult years. I saw people professing a holiness, a sanctification that seemed to be a Sunday-only kind of experience. I remember the overzealous evangelist who left the platform to come down to our family pew to personally invite my dad to go to the altar to be 'entirely sanctified.' "Brother Reinhard, the Bible says: 'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.'" (Hebrews 12:14) Dad's response: "I don't think I could live it. I work every day in a foundry!" I was a pre-teen. I had no idea exactly what that could have meant. I thought maybe if my dad got 'entirely sanctified' then when he hit his thumb with a hammer when pounding a nail he wouldn't say, "Aw shoot." (And I am using the proper vowel in telling this story.)

Again, I remember from my pre-teen years the fiery evangelist Elmer McKay giving an extended invitation. No one knows that name today. Oh, a few of my elderly Free Methodist friends remember Brother McKay, remember him well. He had a positive reputation among other holiness churches in Fort Wayne, so we had visitors galore when people learned that Brother McKay was in town as our evangelist. (Parenthetically, here's a little trivia. His son graduated from Greenville College, was quite a scholar and was once president of Millikin University, for what that's worth...so Elmer, the father, must have done something right.)

In the pulpit he could be very austere, loud and scary, his thick locks needing a brush or comb as he shook his head vigorously to make a point. One of his revival services I remember exceedingly well, and you'll see why in a second or two. Just how many stanzas of "Just As I Am" we sang, I do not recall, but I do remember no one going forward to get 'holiness.' (It was always pronounced with a sanctimonious heavy 'rough breather.')

I'm sure at the time I did not fully understand what Brother McKay was saying. But his words are indelibly recorded in my memory bank. No one was responding to the altar call, so, in a voice much too loud for that small church, he dramatically commanded, "Stay, Holy Spirit, stay, Holy Spirit!" A Pentecostal 'bun head' was visiting from another church, sitting close to the front (it was the second row and to our right; memory serves me well). This lady, new to our church, let out a bloodcurdling shriek, and I lost it. My fourth grade classmate was at my side. I had invited him to the meeting so I could win the New Testament for bringing the most persons to the services. (Incidentally I did win that New Testament.) But my friend next to me, on my left, only enhanced the embarrassment. You see, the shriek triggered my ready-to-empty bladder; yes, I peed my pants, seriously! I've not been very fond of revival invitations ever since.

After the last service of the revival, I took my New Testament to the evangelist to have him sign it. I still have the copy; it is simply signed, "bro. McKay." As I stood near the evangelist for his autograph, I experienced the "aroma of holiness" surrounding this recognized saint of our church—I have total recall. I reflected on that experience much later and knew it was a double-breasted suit in desperate need of dry cleaning.

The 1 John “love not the world” passage was sometimes spelled out for us in meticulous detail. For example, all movies were verboten. I wanted to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. I was only five or six years old when it first appeared in those movie houses—those dens of iniquity. I lusted after Snow White. I copied pictures of the dwarves, my very own drawings, hung them up in my room. I asked my parents if I could go the Rialto Theatre just once. Dad said, “Jimmy, you talk to Jesus about it. If he says yes, we’ll take you.” I went to my room to pray. Even before I got to my knees, I distinctly heard Jesus say, “No!” Imagine that. Yes, imagine that! Because many years later at a Greenville College Faculty Fall Fellowship the program committee decided to show *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* so that in our time of discussion we could discover the spiritual implications of that marvelous Disney production. Jesus had obviously changed his mind!

I could go on at length about negative stuff I associated early on with holiness. I must relate briefly how a pastor’s love blotted all that out one Sunday evening—yes, during an altar call.

I was a senior in high school and wrestling with some personal friendship issues—not all that serious, as I look back on it now. On a memorable Sunday evening, I remember saying to myself as I entered the sanctuary, “So help me, if an invitation is given tonight and someone should have the audacity to come back and invite me forward, I’ll walk out of this church and never come back. I’ve had it with this embarrassing stuff!” Incidentally, it was Elliot Wiegand’s uncle, Pastor L. J. Crist who walked all the way to the back of the church, the last row where I was standing. Clearly he was trying to hold back tears; I saw beyond his tears to his loving heart. Of course I didn’t know it then but he quoted Mark 12:34. In whispered tones he said, “Brother Jim, you aren’t far from the kingdom!” I couldn’t get to the altar fast enough.

Fast forward with me now to last summer. As sometimes happens Marilyn and I went shopping, separately. The more she knows the more she Kohls; I choose Books-A-Million. I always head straight to the back of the store to the Christian living section. The book that caught my eye almost immediately was a book on holiness! I took the book from the shelf and sat down with it and a cup of coffee. What a strange title: The Utter Relief of Holiness. Wow! Relief? Holiness had always meant something austere, giving up movies, maybe the sin of breaking the Sabbath, delivering newspapers on Sunday, or wearing a junior high basketball uniform that the pastor said was much too short! Holiness—almost always something sanctimonious, unattainable—a relief? *Look at it this way*, Eldredge says, *Ask the man consumed with jealousy how he would feel if he woke one day to discover that all he once felt jealous over was simply gone. Ask the raging person what it would be like to be free of rage or the alcoholic what it would be like to be completely free from addiction. Take the things you struggle with and ask yourself, ‘What would life be like if I never struggled with this again?’*

I had time to hurriedly read the book. I bought a hard copy later. Parts of the book I rejected, but for the most part it totally won my heart. And I responded with a resounding, “Yes!” Those in my age group, who grew up in the Wesleyan tradition, will understand me when I say: I found myself in tears at Books-A-Million, “saved and/or sanctified” all over again! And I knew it wasn’t caffeine-induced.

Another has written: *The Big Lie in the church today is that you are nothing more than a sinner saved by grace.* You and I know that we are surely a lot more than that. We are new creatures in Christ. The New Testament calls us “saints, God’s holy ones, children of God.” Clark Pinnock in Flame of Love writes: *What we need from Christ is not so much acquittal as resurrection.*

Living on the right side of Easter and Pentecost! So back to green—life-giving green, the power of springtime green—the newness of life springing up in us! Yes, if anyone is in Christ, she or he is a new creation! James Bryan Smith writes: *When I hear a Christian say, “I’m just a sinner saved by grace,” I want to say that makes about as much sense as a butterfly saying, “I’m just a worm with wings.”*

The late Episcopal priest, Robert Farrar Capon, the pop theologian, could write some very provocative stuff. He died just last year at age 88, after authoring 20 books. He saw churches such as ours as “Guilt Producers Incorporated.” In his estimation, the church has spent so much time producing in us the fear of making mistakes that she has made us like poorly-taught piano students: *we play our songs, but we never really hear them because our main concern is not to make music but to avoid some flub that will get us in Dutch.* Was he talking about us?

Capon accuses us of being afraid of grace, actually more frightened by grace than frightened by law. He shames us for listening to three tempters inside our heads: (1) the resident Moral Theologian who menaces us with no-no’s, (2) the Spiritual Director who fakes us out with promises of perfection, (3) the Old Gossip who tells us that God will get us if we aren’t pious and nice. My second thought, after initially agreeing with him, was, “But what’s wrong with morality, perfection, and piety? They’re all gifts of God’s grace. And who’s afraid of grace?”

I confess I winced a bit at his caricature. I can see why some people might make those judgments of Free Methodists and the holiness tradition in general, at least at some points in our history. However, why not for a moment accept the criticism? Let’s use his categories, properly define his terms, make some important distinctions, and as a result, come to a better understanding of our heritage and its unique features.

I. A resident moral theologian? I rather like the idea.

All religions and cultures claim the presence of something greater than man. Rudolph Otto called this a “numinous.” It simply means all have awe and dread at something, someone beyond them. We’re overwhelmed by it. But is it just an “it”? More than that for us, it’s a genuine Presence with personhood—a Being, a Presence that surrounds us, confronts us. We are confronted by the Holy One, as our reading from Leviticus 19 suggests. From a biblical perspective a “resident moral theologian” is actually quite appropriate.

Henry Cloud has written 9 Things You Simply Must Do. You look his table of contents and gravitate first to, “Learn to hate well.” That’s clever and helpful. We can really know what a person is like when we learn what he hates. Let’s hate whatever would destroy our intimate relationship with God first of all. For starters in human affairs, take pornography—hate it because it can destroy a beautiful marriage relationship. Hate deceit and lying. We could go on and on. Holiness means you hate evil in its variety of forms. It was legalism that made all movies forbidden. But sometimes I think our freedom at the theatre has been over-won. When I

see some of the movie trailers these days, I think, “Are these all safe for us to watch?” I seriously doubt it. Watching vulgarity is hardly making every thought captive to Christ!

But God doesn’t snarl at us, taunting us with a list of no-no’s. Instead he lovingly gives us guidelines to help us avoid moral sickness and death. Of course there are prohibitions. In a moral universe we can’t avoid them. The Bible gives us some “thou shalt not’s” as health warnings. They’ve been written into the very nature of our moral universe.

I recall my being suddenly startled several months ago as we were leaving Salem, VA. I approached I-81 behind the wheel, heading home, and suddenly saw two huge signs in UNCIALS (actually not inch-high but foot high!) The entry ramp and exit ramp were very close to each other. At first the signs were a bit unclear. The one very much adjacent to my interstate entry point seemed to scream at me, WRONG WAY. I was startled at first. *Oh my, am I in the right lane? Oh yes, I’m sure I made the right turn.* I could now see that this was the correct lane and I could relax and drive on. I think morally speaking there are signs like that built into the very fabric of life. WRONG WAY, the signs want to shout at us!—or should be shouting. And we can actually know when we have chosen the right lane. Olin Curtis called it the “uplift of moral supremacy.”

The resident moral theologian is described beautifully in Jeremiah 31:33: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts...* The language of the New Testament is of Christ settling down and being at home in our hearts by faith (Ephesians 3:17) and of *Christ in us the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27).

God says “no” to our vain attempts to play God, to have it our way. When anyone honestly turns his whole life over to God in total surrender, there always is renunciation of one kind or another. Sam Shoemaker used to say, *The cross can be seen as a big “I” with a minus sign through it.* Paul wrote, *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...* (Galatians 2:20)

We Methodists affirm the idea of the Holy One resident within—our moral consultant, our Lord.

II. A spiritual director who guides us toward perfection. Let’s go with it!

Our destiny is perfection. Are we really being fooled by this promise? We’re not anticipating angelic perfection, the destruction of our humanness. God’s plan is to restore our full humanity, our humanness, perfectly. His grace working in us promises to do just that. And that’s what greenness or new life, regeneration and sanctification are all about.

Let me state it again: there are some who say the only difference between a Christian and an everyday run-of-the-mill sinner is that the Christian is forgiven. That’s pretty pessimistic, morally speaking. Even the world holds a higher standard of behavior for the Christian than that. If we all sin every day in thought, word and deed with sins of commission and omission as some creeds indicate, we don’t announce a great deal of hope to our world. Most people would like to be different. We want more than the good news of acquittal. We want to be “made new” in

Christ! People want some sense of mastery over the chaotic forces in their lives. Something's eating them, dividing them, destroying them. Is there any good news, any hope of deliverance?

Justification or forgiveness is surely not the total gospel. There's more. Regeneration and sanctification are important nouns of change. God's wholeness or holiness is imparted to the believer. Through faith in Christ one is not only forgiven, acquitted, or declared righteous; one is actually made righteous. What is the nature of this Christian perfection? It's best defined as God bringing us to maturity—a grown-up relationship with Jesus Christ. All thought of our independence has been removed. No longer do we try to bend God to meet our creature comforts and try to justify ourselves in the attempt. By faith we receive the promise and power of an unbroken personal covenant with Christ, a steady, persistent relationship. Daily obedience and surrender is our assignment and we discover that Christ holds us fast. He owns us!

The Wesleys took "Christian perfection" out of the cloistered halls of monasteries and into the homes, fields, and factories of eighteenth-century England. The Christian is in the process of being perfected; a person becomes holy because that person is walking with God in obedience, trusting the covenant-keeping power of God. Our inclination to pride, anger, evil desire, idolatry, and unbelief may be expelled by love filling the whole heart. The Scriptures clearly teach both the instantaneous gift of salvation and the gradual development of Christ-likeness of character.

How many times in watching the Olympics did we hear Robin Williams reminding us of Mr. Keating in *Dead Poet Society*? ("Seize the day, lads—make your lives extraordinary!") The powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be? I want to say my verse is 2 Corinthians 3:18: *And we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. And this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Of course, perfection in any absolute sense is neither our claim nor our goal. It's not super sainthood. God never intended us to keep our nerve cells anxiously fidgeting for something unattainable. Christian perfection when properly taught, in terms of maturity, growth, intense periods of cleansing and renewal, and new habits of the soul, is a liberating concept. Our distinctive is to announce to the world the optimism of the New Testament. And that is what God has promised; God is able to radically begin it now!

III. R.F. Capon said we're afraid that God will get us if we're not pious and nice. Who among us feels that pressure? We've all seen our share of people trying so hard to be pious and nice. Who knows their motivation? He must be talking about piosity—piety for show.

Mature believers are seldom motivated by fear of what God will do, but rather by what God has already done for them. A life of utter devotion is the only responsible way to live. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all"—my integrity, my purity. That's true piety.

To be pious in the best sense is simply to be in company with committed believers eager to see the church renewed. Piety is characterized by habitual obedience, faithful prayer and Bible study, compassionate outreach, and loving concern for the marginalized, the needy. So genuine piety

results in “niceness,” if by that we mean generosity, courtesy, and hospitality—genuine caring even for those in our immediate families, those living closest to us.

Methodism was a new version of “pietism” in England, adopting a rigorous life of devotion to God. They were “methodical” about it. They were Christians in earnest to get to heaven. What’s more they earnestly sought to do God’s will on earth in social action.

Of course, the truly pious never parade their sanctity, never speak of their perfection. A saint would be the last person on earth to know it of herself or himself. The biography of a saint is vastly different from an autobiography! The truly pious embody Micah 6:8 as they *do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God*. The life is inward devotion and noiseless acts of love. And the person is nice—fun to be with—generous to others with one’s time and means.

Holiness is not a scary thing. Who’s afraid of holiness? It’s liberating. It brings “utter relief.” It doesn’t make you do embarrassing things in church!

Brothers and sisters, finally whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, fill all your mind with these things. (Philippians 4:8) Who was it who called it “the expulsive power of a new affection”?

I conclude by reminding you that the holy, and holiness, can startle us and be found in surprisingly different ways and locations. There’s a marvelous “West Side story” in Exodus chapter 3. Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law. He leads the flock to the west side of the wilderness. There near Horeb Moses turns aside to see a bush burning, but it is not consumed. The Lord speaks to Moses, saying: *Take off your shoes—you are standing on holy ground*. God then gives Moses that great assignment to lead his people out of bondage, and God reveals his name: *I Am Who I Am*. Well, that story is the backdrop for what I share next.

Some have heard me tell about a night in the synagogue Temple Shalom on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. One of my 101 students, while waiting for the Friday evening Sabbath service to begin, was reading from their prayer book, Gates of Prayer. “Prof, look at this. This is awesome.” I read it and loved it. I have memorized it and prayed it often. Here’s the prayer: *Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing; let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see wherever we gaze the bush that burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness, and exclaim in wonder: How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it! Blessed is the Eternal One, the holy God!*

Barbara Brown Taylor writes like she too has read that prayer. (Surely not, she is simply commenting on the Exodus 3 “take-off-your-shoes” passage.) Listen to her audacity as she invites us to become the burning bush! *Others will then turn aside to observe us*. Think of it, we are to be bearers of God’s holiness. She writes: *Know that wherever you are standing is holy ground. Stop and take off your shoes. Risk getting burned, looking foolish, being wrong. Drop what you are doing and turn aside, to look into every bush, every face, every event of your life—the big and the small, the hoped for and the feared, the bad and the good; look into every one of*

them for God's presence and call. Believe that whatever is going on, God is in it, and can be trusted. If you are still willing, go the last step. Once you have gotten the knack of seeing burning bushes everywhere, consent to be set on fire yourself, to be for someone else the very presence and call of God. Like Moses without his veil, go ahead and frighten people with your shining face, so full of uncommon light, so alive with unimagined possibility that sometimes the fire scares even you. (Holiness can be a very scary thing, as I shared with you at the outset.☺)
Taylor concludes: *It may or may not hurt, but we will not be consumed, and we will not be alone. Because I AM THAT I AM is with us, has been with us all along, and will be with us forever, world without end. Amen.*

I know what you're thinking: *It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing...*