

**February 19, 2017**

**Tim Hughes**

**Sermon: "Sweatheart"**

**The New Testament Reading: Matthew 5:38-48**

<sup>38</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

**The Old Testament Reading: Leviticus 19:1-18**

<sup>19</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. <sup>4</sup>Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God. <sup>5</sup>When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable on your behalf. <sup>6</sup>It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. <sup>7</sup>If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. <sup>8</sup>All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the Lord; and any such person shall be cut off from the people. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. <sup>12</sup>And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. <sup>13</sup>You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. <sup>14</sup>You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. <sup>15</sup>You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. <sup>17</sup>You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

### **Sermon:**

Here's a little story, in the spirit of our Scripture readings and, I guess, Valentine's Day.

The poet Thomas Lux was driving his car down the interstate on one of those mountain passages of I-40, outside of Asheville. If you've been to Montreat or to Asheville you know what I'm talking about. There is a curvy, treacherous stretch of road in and around the continental divide that spans several miles.

Lux was making his way through these mountains when he noticed an overpass. More specifically, he noticed a message that had been scrawled with spray paint across the overpass. The words of the message were located as such a place on the bridge that the only way he could imagine it being written was if a man had been suspended by his ankles - possibly even just held by the grip of another man's hands. He

used masculine pronouns in telling this story, he said, because only a man would do something this stupid.<sup>1</sup>

He imagined a man being held by his ankles, suspended upside-down some fifty feet above interstate traffic, spray paint in hand. Perhaps he practiced writing upside down. Perhaps not. At any rate, the message on the bridge read, in enormous letters: "I love you, sweetheart."

It's almost certainly a spelling error, but Lux found himself obsessed with that moment, that funny phrase, as poets so often are. So when he arrived at his destination he began working on this poem, which I want to read for you now. It's called:

### **I Love You Sweatheart**

A man risked his life to write the words.  
A man hung upside down (an idiot friend  
holding his legs?) with spray paint  
to write the words on a girder fifty feet above  
a highway. And his beloved,  
the next morning driving to work...?  
His words are not (meant to be) so unique.  
Does she recognize his handwriting?  
Did he hint to her at her doorstep the night before  
of "something special, darling, tomorrow"?  
And did he call her at work  
expecting her to faint with delight  
at his celebration of her, his passion, his risk?  
She will know I love her now,  
the world will know my love for her!  
A man risked his life to write the words.  
Love is like this at the bone, we hope, love  
is like this, Sweatheart, all sore and dumb  
and dangerous, ignited, blessed - always,  
regardless, no exceptions,  
always in blazing matters like these: blessed.

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<sup>1</sup> The story and a reading of the poem can be seen here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0kQQkqNHdw>

*Let's pray. God as we try to wrap our heads around these words like love and justice and forgiveness and holiness – give us wisdom. Give us insight to see the truth that may be crackling in and around the edges of even my trifling thoughts. Amen.*

Love is like this, at the bone, we hope, love is like this, Sweetheart.

I'm really fond of that line of the poem because it manages, I think, to capture several of the less-appreciated dimensions of love.

We tend to celebrate the more sentimental aspects. We could call them the Sweetheart aspects.

But love is also *foolish* and *dangerous*. Love is *hard work*.

The Sweetheart aspects. I also like the poem because the poet seems to begin by mocking the man on the bridge, only to end with a sort of begrudging respect for the audacity of what he is trying to express.

The suggestion, I think, is that love is worth it.

Do I sound like a man who is getting married in a month? Maybe. But I swear that these thoughts reverberate through the Scriptures, even and perhaps especially in dusty book like Leviticus.

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You know, Leviticus makes one lonely appearance in this year's cycle of lectionary readings, and even this one little reading wouldn't make the cut if Lent began earlier in the year. The book has a bad reputation. I don't know how many people here ever challenged themselves to read the entire Bible from cover to cover. It's a great goal and Leviticus is probably where you gave up. It is a book of laws and rules, long-winded and repetitive and a little nuts, like your great uncle. It's also a handy resource if you want to call someone an "abomination," because the word is used repeatedly throughout the book for offenses large and small – just ask an LGBT person. So yes, we tend to avoid Leviticus. I'm not saying there aren't problems there but there is actually a lot of life in

there too. And as is often the case with the Bible, a little context goes a long way.

Leviticus is the third book of the Hebrew Scriptures, right at the center of the Torah – what the Jewish tradition considers to be the heart of the law. Read on its own, without interpretation or context, Leviticus presents as a burdensome, arbitrary list of rules, obsessed with purity and laced with patriarchy and homophobia. I think if we don't admit that then we are in an important way not telling the truth about our own tradition. But what function did these laws serve in their time?

According to tradition, God gives the law to the Israelite people in their first moments of freedom, stumbling about in the wilderness, after generations of slavery. God gives the law “so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land you are to possess” (Deuteronomy 5:33). Right away we begin to see that law is always interwoven with story and relationship. We begin to see that the law functioned to create space for community – for relationship between people and for relationship with the divine. The law was never an end unto itself, but is rather given as a vessel of freedom and grace.

Today's reading is bookended with two major values that the rest of the rules seem to strive towards.

At the beginning the reading: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:1). And at the end of the reading: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now depending on your personal psychology and levels of church-baggage, you might have varying reactions to the idea of holiness. But what I like the most about today's text, is that it takes some highly sentimentalized words like “holiness” and “love” and attaches them to extremely concrete actions.

You'll be hard pressed to find someone who objects to the notion of loving their neighbor as they love their self. But Leviticus takes the easy sentiment and applies it directly to poor and foreign people in your midst.

When I said love your neighbor as you love yourself, what I meant was: don't harvest the entirety of your crop. Leave the margins on the ground so that they can be gathered by people in your neighborhood who are going hungry. Leave it there for them, knowing full well that they didn't buy it, or plant it, or harvest it. Love them like you love your own belly.

All of a sudden that love seems like a little more work, Sweatheart.

You shall be holy like God is holy. Ok? Ok. But when I say "be holy," what I'm really saying is to revere your parents. Not your idealized parents but your actual parents, the ones who can aggravate you more efficiently than anyone on the planet. When I say "be holy" it means removing the barriers that make it hard for blind and deaf people to participate in your worship. Not metaphorical people with disabilities but the actual people in your community who don't come to your church because your church is full of stumbling blocks.

All of a sudden holiness seems like a little more work, Sweatheart.

Don't even get me started on Leviticus 19:33: "When an alien – aka an immigrant – resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

I read the Pew Research Survey that came out this week saying that 73% of evangelical Christians support the President's immigration ban and I say – the work of holiness and the work of love are harder than that, Sweathearts. You can't just deploy those words when you want too. That's too easy.

What makes the Book of Leviticus come alive for me is to see it not as a sterile rulebook but as a set of training wheels in the wilderness – a way of life for a people who found themselves intoxicated and overwhelmed with their newfound freedoms. A way to begin defining a space for God.

The rules are the beginning – not the end of it. But nor are they irrelevant. They create a space.

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When I was in my young twenties, Anthony was among the first of my friends to get married. Young and in love he left our tribe of bachelorhood and seemed to be living in a different universe.

The first six months of the marriage were rough. Lots of fighting led to lots of therapy. We watched, wide-eyed. When we ran into Anthony we asked questions like you might ask of a traveler, returning from a country we had never visited. “How is going?” I asked one day. He used words that seem to come straight from their marriage counselor. “I’m learning to love Katie better,” he said soberly, “by cleaning the trimmings of my beard from the sink every morning.”

We were not expecting this answer. What happened to the Anthony we knew? Before the wedding he talked about his passion for his girlfriend. He talked about wanting to spend eternity with her. He talked about sex - a lot. Now, when he talked about love, his words were measured. He talked about bathroom habits and chores. We were very concerned.

It took me maybe a decade to understand the deep wisdom of what he was saying. To understand that love, if it is to have any enduring power, is buttressed by a thousand unsexy decisions, by actions, by rules even, that say again and again and again: I choose you. I choose you, Sweatheart. Love is like this at the bone, all sore and dumb and blessed.

When I look at Anthony today, his decade of partnership with Katie, his children – the love is so obvious. It has achieved this gravitas, this air of inevitability. It is way, way bigger than beard trimmings. But also, in critical way, it isn’t. It’s a thousand mornings of painstakingly wiping the sink, because that mess drives someone crazy.

That’s the kind of love I hear in these lines of Leviticus. The details. The nitty-gritty.

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Now – if any of you have actually taken out your Bibles and read the text, you’ll see that it comes immediately after and immediately before all manner of rules that don’t seem like vessels of grace and love. The word ‘abomination’ doesn’t sit well with us. Instructions to stone people who violate the rules don’t sit well with us either.

And indeed, to read the entirety of the Old Testament is to see the messy, sometimes violent struggle of the people of God to hit that sweet spot between structure and freedom, between justice and grace. There are many, many examples of that effort not ending well.

Which is why it feels so important to me to end with Jesus. Our text from Matthew is taken from the Sermon on the Mount. You’ll see that no one has a greater knowledge of and respect for the law than Jesus. He quotes it constantly. He lives and breathes the rules. I think Jesus understands what my friend Anthony did – the rules are like gravity they ground us, they connect us to each other and to God. They define the sacred space. Jesus doesn’t eliminate them. But look what he is doing. Constantly re-interpreting them. Constantly subverting them. Constantly making space for grace.

“You have heard it said, “Love your neighbors and hate your enemies. But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

I think of Jesus halting the execution of the woman caught in adultery, asking anyone without sin to throw the first stone.

When asked, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?” he replied that the greatest commandment is to ‘Love the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul.’ And the second – quoting Leviticus - is to love your neighbor as yourself.’ All of the law and words of the prophets, he said, hang upon these two commandments.

In other words, “Love God and love people.” And love them not just with your words, but with all the dumb, boring tasks that make up a community. The gravity that holds us together and gives love it’s meaning. And when the dumb, boring, actions and rules threaten to



overwhelm you and kill the very love you seek, loosen your grip. Trust in the love and grace of God to hold you, to restore life where legalism took hold.

It's a dance. It's a delicate, foolish balance. But it also strikes me, a recent pilgrim, as what love is really like at the bone. Full of hope and hard work. Dumb and sore and always blessed.

It's as ridiculous and moving as a man who once hung in the air, risking his life, simply so that we might receive the message more clearly than before. The message of how deeply we are loved, Sweethearts, and how far he would go to let us know.