

Some of you may know that I am something of a word freak. I enjoy bad puns and verbal irony, and Bill and I typically start our day together by doing the New York Times Crossword puzzle together -- hint -- it's not as hard as you think if you get used to thinking of alternative meanings to the clues. For instance is a "gig" a show for a band or a pronged spear? I love that stuff!

I am amazed by language and how it functions not only to communicate but also to form how we perceive the world around us. We all know that some languages have many more words for things than modern American English. Inuit with its reported 50 comes to mind. Is it possible that that plethora gives them ability to notice finer distinctions than our one or two -- snow and graupel? In my spare time, I wonder how my brother, a Wycliffe Bible translation consultant does what he does given the vast differences between the places and people with whom he works (Eastern Africa -- primarily Uganda and Tanzania) and the Ancient Near east -- for that matter how do we translate given the Ancient Near East and our own day and time.

I can tell you that my own religious life and understanding of God was opened up when I was first introduced to the Name of God and its meaning in high school. The name that God gives for godself is usually pronounced Yahweh but to be fair the Hebrew people never spoke it -- it was THAT holy. The name is not a noun static and unchanging but a verb with a range of meaning that was literally eye-opening to me. I am. I will Be. I create. I am creating. The Essence of being and all that is. . . .you get the idea.

All of this is on my mind and in what I call my prayer pool because I am doing two separate book studies. One on a book by Lauren Winner that takes up the Biblical metaphors for God that we typically pass over in favor of the beloved shorthand Of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the other by John Dominic Crossan on the issue of violence in the Bible -- and because I fear that we have a linguistic lens that may not be helpful in interpreting two of the passages for today.

Most people's eyes glaze over at the mere mention of the book of Leviticus. Most of us on turning to the first page and seeing that it starts not with a compelling story but information on offerings of various sorts, thumb right past to Numbers, a book that is not much better given that it is an official census. But squirreled away in Leviticus is something called the Holiness Code and our passage comes from that section. "You shall be holy for I the Lord am holy" is a refrain that sounds throughout the section.

How do you hear those words? Although it is passing from general usage "shall" when used with second and third persons often connotes duty and obligation, and the word is still used heavily in legal language. That makes this phrase seem heavy to me. It is a commandment of the law. Be Holy. Be scrupulous in attention to these laws! That is not in itself a bad thing. What IS a less than desirable thing is the fact that interpreting this as the force of law holds an implicit "OR ELSE." That "OR ELSE" comes from a God of retributive justice sometimes described in the Bible -- not just the Old Testament but the New as well. Crossan notes in his book that there is a tension between the biblical depiction of the God of Retributive justice and that of the God of Distributive Justice whose concern seems to be that all have enough to survive and thrive in God's world.

Here's the thing--Ancient Hebrew had no future tense. Young's literal translation puts it this way.

Speak unto all the company of the sons of Israel, and thou hast said unto them, Ye are holy, for holy [am] I, Jehovah, your God.

When read that way, holiness is a gift of God. The God who creates us and loves us. The God who shows us how to be God like. God invites us to see the holiness not just in ourselves but others and the world around us and act accordingly. God invites us to step into God's life and love by sharing with God and each other the bounty of God's kingdom.

It makes a difference whether one hears these words as coming from a strict and disciplining Father, Warrior, Judge God -- a God who looks and acts like the powers of empires and nations or whether we hear these words coming from the very heart of love offering a gift of surpassing value. (Which is what Jews have always maintained the Torah to be.)

Now, turn to Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount. I have said before that Jesus ups the ante on what it means to be righteous and he does so again in our passage today. Basically, he says the laws of retributive justice do not apply in God's kingdom. It is NOT an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It is turn the other cheek. It is NOT love your neighbor, but ALSO love your enemy as well. This, he says, is the way of God, sending sun and rain to all. Then he gives this imperative. BE PERFECT as Your Heavenly Father is perfect.

Be honest. How many of you had a sinking feeling-- a feeling that had you reeling under the weight of I'll NEVER be able to do that? How many of you thought that the exacting standards of God are beyond you?

Back up.

Know that the word used for perfect has an array of meanings. It is TELIOS -- a Greek word that can indeed mean perfect. But what if the translator grabbed the wrong meaning? What if the meaning is more like adult and mature? Or what if the meaning is perfect in the sense of completely what it is intended to be? And what if what we are created to be is loving and free and grateful?

What if this imperative is like the imperative to be holy, an invitation to be who we are created to be and in some sense already are? I don't know about you but to me that makes a world of difference because I am no longer toiling under the weight of woulda, coulda, shoulda and can just be – or become.

That also changes the challenge of the invitation from “How in the world do I do that?” to “What keeps me from doing this?”

We are created in love, by love FOR love. Not narrowly for family and friends as some suppose but for the world. All of it. Friend and foe alike. Hear the word differently, listen to the invitation of the Holy One and put aside all that keeps us from being who we are created to be together.