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House Rules

Leviticus 19:1-2 and 15-18

(Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 NRSV) 1 "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 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. ...15 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. 16 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. 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18 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."

Back in my younger days, I used to play a lot of bridge. But I once had the misfortune to somehow find myself in what had been billed as a "friendly" tournament. But friendly it was definitely not. You would have thought that ending world hunger was the agenda from the almost obsessively serious way in which the players took everything. And my wife Barbara and I once played bridge with some friends, one of whom also took it all way too seriously. When his wife would make a bid or play a card that he didn't understand or approve of, he would yell at her. We stopped playing bridge with those folks. Out of those experiences I learned that it was important to have a set of "house rules" about the game. Sometimes those rules didn't match the "official" rules. For example, in the official rules of bridge, if you put down a card that you had previously indicated you were out of, there is a very stiff penalty assessed to your team. But our "house rules" were more relaxed; instead we had the "Two Mess Up Per Night Rule" – you could make two dumb mistakes a night without being penalized. Sometimes "house rules" don't even have to be stated explicitly; everybody just knows

them; for example, in Hawaii you should never, ever go into someone's house with your shoes on.

Every game needs rules. Otherwise, there is no game. How many of you have ever played with a four-year-old who is just learning the whole notion of games and rules and yet who makes up rules for the game as he goes along? It's sort of funny and charming for awhile, but it quickly gets boring. Without some agreed-upon rules, you don't even really have a game at all, just individuals doing their own thing. But rules, particularly the agreed-upon "house rules" that folks may develop also always express values, don't they? Our bridge-playing "Two Mess Up Rule" expressed the fact that while keeping score and winning were important, so was keeping things fun and being charitable with mistakes. A pre-schooler who is learning to play T-Ball is playing a game whose rules are very much like baseball, but whose "House Rules," as it were, are designed to make sure that everybody has fun and doesn't feel stupid – hence the rule that you aren't done batting until you actually hit the ball off the tee. The value there, of course, that is being expressed is that with young children, it's not only important to keep score but to make sure that all the kids feel included.

The Book of Leviticus functioned, in its original time and place, as the "House Rules" for the people of Israel after their exile from Egypt and going into their new home in Canaan. And if you read through the book of Leviticus, you will find some of those rules sounding very strange to modern ears. And sometimes those rules are set forth in almost mind-numbing detail. And these days, the references we do hear to Leviticus are more likely to be a from a tiny handful of passages about sexuality that some folks

seem to love to quote. And yet there is more to Leviticus than that and understanding why and how Leviticus functioned as the “house rules” for the Hebrew people – and the values it expressed – can tell us something about the gospel and about the “house rules” for Christians – for individuals, for families, for friends, for churches.

If I were to try to sum up the four values that the Book of Leviticus’ “house rules” are seeking to express they are these: Survival, unity, fertility, and purity. Let me say a word on each before asking how our passage today can speak to us. First, **survival**. That band of people who escaped from Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years were always being threatened by extinction. And so all of the various food rules about what you can eat with what and how you handle this or that food or don’t eat this or that food were sensible rules that helped ensure against disease in a time where there was no refrigeration. And **unity**: Again, a relatively small band of folks, threatened by disease from within or enemies from without could not afford the luxury of fighting among themselves. And so while some of the rules in Leviticus ring very harsh in our ears, we can nonetheless see in them a people’s commitment to staying together and staying *focused* on their task and mission at hand. Third, **fertility**: A small band of folks needs to keep adding new additions, new children, to its ranks and it needs to be absolutely clear whose children are whose. Hence, again, some of the harsh sounding rules about sexuality are actually designed to encourage responsible childbearing and child-rearing. And **holiness**: In some ways that may be the oddest one in our ears. Yet that is where our reading for today begins: “*You shall be Holy.*” Goodness, that sounds like an impossible burden. I am reminded of the hymn – which I love – called “*Take*

Time to Be Holy” and I think sometimes, “*Lord, I find it hard enough some days to take time to be civil!*” But again, from the perspective of a threatened people, it is absolutely essential that they have practices and rituals and rules that remind them of who they are and Whose they are. They are **God’s** people and God has some very specific ideas about who they need to be. God expects them to be *different* from their neighbors in some crucial ways. For while they were always to open to taking in their neighbors in need – and after all, there are many who claim that the virtue of hospitality is the most important virtue in the Hebrew scriptures – nonetheless God was also making it clear that there were certain practices and values held by the folks around them that they were **not** to imitate. Hospitality did not mean blind acceptance of every cultural practice around them. And so, unlike their neighbors, they were not to practice infanticide – the killing of unwanted babies, particularly females. They were not to engage in cultic prostitution – worshiping Yahweh but wanting to nonetheless to engage in sexual relations with the priestesses of the other religions of the day. They were not to take advantage of the poor. All of these “house rule” expressed values that were key to their identity as **God’s** people. All of these “house rules” about “holiness” were ways of **not** letting the culture around them subvert who they were.

Seen that way, I begin to realize that indeed has things to teach us about what it means to be God’s people, Christ’s people, in **our** context. For in some ways, we aren’t in such a different place than those Hebrew people, are we? The culture around **us** is increasingly less religious and the consumer and secular values of that culture threaten

our own identity and practices. The increasing incivility of the world around us always insidiously threatens to make **us** less civil. The increasing politicization of what seems like all of life threatens to skew our own decision making processes where we too often are tempted to take up sides and sling slogans.

So what can this passage teach us as Christians about our own “house rules” as individuals, as family, as friends, as church? Let me suggest two such rules.

First, did you hear the line in our passage for this morning that says “*You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people*”? Put positively, rather than negatively, I think this, particularly, suggests a first “house rule” for us in *our* day and time and place. That rule is this: “**Communicate Directly.**” When our youngest daughter was a college freshman, she used to regale us with stories of the drama of college life, stories about where, say, one girl does or does not like a particular boy who likes her. And, Katie would point out, too often instead of the girl telling the boy that directly, she would instead tells someone else in the dorm whom she knew would tell someone else who would tell the boy. But you can imagine the mis-communication that happens along the way, even the inadvertent untruths and “slanders” that might come about. And, of course, if you are thinking that this sort of thing doesn’t happen just among college freshman, you’re right: even adults can get caught up in this sort of pattern: for fear of being perceived as not being “nice,” someone will not share their feelings directly with the person who’s troubling them and instead tells someone else – hoping it will get back to the right person. It may seem to be a way of avoiding conflict, but, really, it just makes it worse. And so an individual, or friends, or family, or church

who would thrive would do well to adopt this first “house rule” of **“communicate directly.”** Because the stakes are too high not to. It’s too easy to unintentionally hurt. It’s too easy to get off-track and not stay focused on what God is calling you to do and be in those relationships. And so in this house, this church, I propose that it be the rule that we will always whenever possible seek to communicate with one another directly – always with gentleness and respect and hope – but directly nonetheless.

There’s a second “house rule” that that line from Leviticus about slander suggests as a “house rule” for Christian individuals, friends, family, and church in our day and time, and it is this: **“Always assume the best about someone whenever possible.”** I will tell you, if I had been more able to more consistently follow that rule in my life, I would be a better person today, I think. But this goes against so much of our culture doesn’t it? You can’t open the paper or turn on the radio or visit innumerable blogs without hearing a new conspiracy theory about why this or that person doesn’t really mean what they say and can’t be trusted. Sadly, we live in a *culture of suspicion* where too often the media – and maybe even we, sometimes – hear someone say something and our response to it is to wonder what they *really* meant or what they’re hiding or what they’re up to. I know why the media tend to do this: in part it’s because stories about people who say what they mean and do so civilly and directly are not nearly as entertaining, as “juicy,” as stories about hidden motives and backstabbing and hypocrisy and conspiracies. But if you or I find ourselves treating our friends, our family, even our church family that way, then too often we will end up, in Leviticus’

words, committing a no doubt unintentional but nonetheless very real “slander.” But we need to guard against it. We need, in my opinion, to institute or revive the spiritual discipline in our lives of *always starting out by assuming the best about another person’s words or actions*. Because if we don’t, if a culture of suspicion takes too much root, then friends and family and even church can’t thrive like it should. And it will be easy to get off-track and lose sight of what God is calling us to be, what God is calling us to do. And so in this house, this church, I propose that it be the rule that we will always assume the best about one another until proven otherwise.

I’ll bet you can begin to add other “house rules.” In fact, I hope that the idea will get under your skins; I hope it’s what you talk about at lunch today and think about this week. For the rules that we should have, starting with these two, I believe, really have the same function as the house rules that those ancient Hebrews had: **to ensure that their capacity to be a blessing to the world would thrive**. And that, my friends, is the very same reason that we need to have in our relationships and in our church good and thoughtful and life-giving “house rules” – because God has a purpose for you; God has a purpose for us. That purpose in this church is to express the unconditional love and grace of God to those who have been wounded, to those who are seeking, to those who aren’t satisfied and yearn for something deeper.

When I was growing up, my parents sometimes used a line that has stayed with me to this day. Usually it was said when I was doing something wrong. Maybe your parents or grandparents said it too: **“In this house, we.....”** *In this house*, we don’t hit the dog. *In this house* we don’t make fun of people *In this house* we don’t keep all our

allowance for ourselves but always give some to the church. *In this house* we say our prayers at night. In this house, we try to find the good in every person. *In this house....*

How about for you? How about us? *In this house, **we**.....*