

## On Being Holy

Exodus 30:22-33

*Exodus 30:22-33. The Lord spoke to Moses: Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, two hundred and fifty, and two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, and five hundred of cassia—measured by the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of olive oil; and you shall make of these a sacred anointing-oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing-oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt-offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand; you shall consecrate them, so that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, in order that they may serve me as priests. You shall say to the Israelites, ‘This shall be my holy anointing-oil throughout your generations. It shall not be used in any ordinary anointing of the body, and you shall make no other like it in composition; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an unqualified person shall be cut off from the people.’*

I know. That was a weird scripture to read in church, let alone to preach from. In fact, you could imagine that scripture being used in a church promo: “First United Methodist Church, where we never try to preach from the Exodus instructions for making anointing oil!” Sorry. But if you can put aside for a moment your amazement that God’s holy inspired Word, which is silent on so many things, *does* specify how much cassia to weigh out in the oil mixture – I mean, really, God? You include that but can’t put in, “Thou shalt use thy turn signal”? That’s the one we need! – where was I? Oh, yes. if you can set aside your puzzlement at this even being here, there are actually a couple of interesting things about this passage.

First of all, I think it’s interesting that it had to be a special recipe. This particular oil, with spices in this precise proportion, was to be used only in the sanctuary of God, dedicated only to worship. No one was to make any anointing oil that was even *similar* to it for personal use. And this was a serious matter. Anyone who used the sacred oil recipe for anointing their own body was to be banished from the people of Israel. And the theme continues. I didn’t want to make our liturgist read any more of this chapter, but the next verses give the recipe for the incense that is to be burned in the sanctuary, and once again the law says that no similar incense is to be made for use as personal perfume. It is to be kept entirely distinct, separate, unique. When you enter the holy place, you are supposed to know that you are entering a different realm, and you are supposed to recognize that with all your senses.

Why do I find that interesting? Because I still wonder almost every day about that question: How different is the church supposed to be from the rest of the world? Here we see codified the instruction that the holy place is supposed to be clearly, visibly, even smellably different from the rest of the community, and that separation is supposed to be rigorously maintained and enforced. And there *is* something in that, I’ve come to recognize. We’ve forgotten that in American Protestantism for the past few decades, where the fashion has been to make ourselves as similar to the world as possible. In the 90s and 2000s, it became all the rage to build churches that looked like the corporate headquarters of software firms – complete with Starbucks franchises and fitness centers with climbing walls. In those churches, people gathered on Sundays in “Worship Centers” that looked and felt like convention halls or high tech theaters. Now, all this was done for a good reason. The idea was to build bridges to unchurched people who might feel uncomfortable going to a strange “Sanctuary” with all that stained glass and all those peculiar rituals. And it worked, sometimes. But as time went on people in those Big Box Suburban churches began to feel that something was lacking. If church is indistinguishable from a lecture (with an opening band), why bother? You can get that anywhere.

A few years ago, in a “visioning” meeting here, I asked a group of our members what they would do if a tornado completely destroyed our building and they had to start from scratch. I was proud of their responses: they said they would rebuild and that they would want to stay downtown because that’s where the ministry is. As for that new building, it would be a smaller, more energy-efficient structure, with multi-purpose rooms – but then they added, “But we don’t want the place where we worship to look like a conference hall. We want it to look like a church.” At some level, we’re supposed to be unique, they felt.

From what I’ve read, a whole generation of new believers have the same feeling. In a strange reversal of recent trends, young seekers of Christ are going to formal liturgical churches. Millennial believers are leaving their Evangelical Weekend Religious Convention Centers in hordes and seeking God in Roman Catholic and High Anglican and Episcopal services – the ones with ancient liturgies, formal language, weekly Eucharist, and yes, anointing oil and incense. Something within us knows that when we come into the presence of God, it is supposed to be special. It is supposed to be different. It is supposed to be holy.

But there’s a problem with that, isn’t there? When the things of God are kept wholly separate from everything else, isn’t there a danger of becoming irrelevant? We can separate ourselves off so much that we live in our own little private world, incomprehensible to everyone else, and end up, justifiably, being ignored. There’s a danger for us church people, too. If our church life is kept distinct from the rest of our lives, then we can end up the worst sort of hypocrites – acting all holy on Sunday morning in the Sanctuary of God, then going to work on Monday to claw our way to the top like everyone else, as if Sunday had never happened.

That’s why we should look at the second interesting thing in this passage from Exodus. Maybe you noticed it, too. The holy anointing oil is to be poured over all the furniture of the Sanctuary (which includes the priests) and *everything that the oil touches becomes holy*. Moreover, *everything that those various furniture items touch become holy*. Did you get that? The holiness of God’s sanctuary is intended to be transferred. The holiness of God is supposed to be a communicable holiness – in C.S. Lewis’s words, “a good infection.”

So we are to be different, but we are supposed to be a sort of difference that reaches out and spreads. That’s our challenge, and it’s easier said than done. Throughout the Bible, and throughout all the millennia of subsequent history, people of faith have resolutely and creatively tried to find a good balance – and failed. Either we have hidden ourselves away in monasteries or private sects, defending our holiness against being defiled by contact with others, and become useless in that way, or we have tried so hard to connect with the world around us that it has become impossible to see any difference at all, which has made us useless in another way. Somehow, there must be a middle path, a way for followers of Christ to be both distinct and engaged with others, to affirm both holiness and connection to the world around us.

So, for the first few weeks of 2015, I’m going to be exploring that issue in a new sermon series. We’re going to be working through the Bible – Old and New Testaments – looking at specific times in God’s salvation history when the faithful have been confronted by their society and have had to decide how to represent God in that context. Sometimes they’ve done well. Other times they’ve done . . . badly. Either way, we have much to learn from those who have gone before us.

But the essence of the series is right here, in the mixing of the anointing oil. We, the children of God, are to be clearly different from others – that’s what I mean by “holy” – and are to go out into the world bearing that holiness with us, transforming everything we touch.