

## BE HOLY – BY YOUR YES TO GOD

Moses lived about 3,200 years ago. We know he leads the people of Israel out of Egypt, and eventually to the place of the Promised Land. You have a sense of what that was like—remember, they wander in the desert for 40 years; they're nomads; they have herds; there's a big group of people and so forth, and there's a lot of complaining going on – it's a tough life. Into that group of people, that community of the Israelites, God says, “*Be holy.*”

Do you think 3,200 years ago, they felt they were more inclined to be holy than we might feel as we sit here and hear that today, as the Lord says to all of you, “*Be holy*” – and we all blink and say, “Ah, Lord, I'd love to be holy. I really don't know how to become holy, but I would love to be holy...probably, unless I'm thinking ‘I don't know what that means, and I'm not sure I want to go there.’”

This “holiness” thing comes up in the gospel today. Jesus talks about what is called the Lex Talionis, The Lex Talionis had been put together to try to limit retaliation, because when people retaliate and seek revenge, they don't want to do it proportionately – they want to do it and send a signal so that you don't ever do that to them again so it's always, “I'll do this to you, and then some.” And it's the “and then some” which infuriates the other person, and then that person retaliates and then some...and, where does it end? So, the Lex Talionis was that you cannot do more than take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – there's a limit to how you can retaliate in any kind of a moral way – and this was the Jewish understanding of things. That's how they're thinking – when God speaks to them: “*I know you're thinking about getting even, and I'm calling you be holy*” – they are on different paths; different levels.

I think people have an understanding of what it means to be good. They know a good person, they know a bad person; they know when they're good, and when they're not good. I think people have a sense of goodness, but it's not as clear that people have a sense of holiness: of who's holy and what is holy. We want to – and sometimes, if we get person like a Mother Teresa, we all say “yeah, she's really holy!” Okay - but how many of *them* are there in life?

Holiness is a characteristic, a trait: it's something that lives in people. You can't get it on your own. You can't merit it. You can't earn it. You can't achieve it by keeping the commandments, And so we need to realize that only God makes you holy. Holiness is a gift that God gives to you. It's a blessing that comes from saying “yes” to God. The more you say yes to Him, the more holy you become. It's very simple. We don't think it is; we think it's way beyond us, but it is not: the more you say yes to God (“whatever you want, Lord!”) – His gift to you is closeness to him. Closeness to the Holy One makes you holy. It's *grace*.

Grace – that's another word that we use all the time, but I don't think everybody has an easy understanding of what grace is, you know? We tend to quantify it (e.g., “how much” grace). But grace is the effect of having a *relationship*. We all have a sense of a gracious person, and we've all met gracious people. When you are in the presence of a gracious person, you like that – it makes you feel good. They attend to you, they have a spirit of hospitality, there's a care there, it's not about themselves – it's about you, you. And when you're in their presence and you're interacting with them, there's something in you that happens, that says, “I want to be my best self in the presence of this gracious person. I want the good angel in me to surface.” So, a relationship with a gracious person brings out a positive, beneficial effect.

The Gracious Person, when you draw into a relationship with Him and say “yes” to Him, the graciousness has an effect: it makes you holy.

And it isn't so much when you're kneeling in prayer with your hands folded, unaware of anybody around you. It happens anywhere, any time. On Thursday, I was at a funeral over at Grace Presbyterian Church in Jenkintown. He was a young man, 33 years old, who had died of a very serious illness, and they just couldn't save him. He was the third son of this family, and he was married to the daughter of one of our parishioners, and so I was asked if I would go over and participate in the funeral service. The woman who was the minister and a friend of their family for 30 years, she organized it and, and she preached and so forth. I did a reading and a prayer, and I was just there for moral support. There were different testimonies given. His wife, a widow now at 30, gave a wonderful presentation: just great grace under great pressure. There was *holiness* there. The boy's brothers got up and spoke. This was their little brother, except he was 6'7" – so he was little in terms of age, but big in terms of size. They were talking about how the older brother was looking up to the younger brother. And then the dad got up, and he was talking about his relationship with his son. He said, "You know, a couple weeks before he died, I was visiting with him in the hospital. And he asked me, "Dad, do you really believe that you're going to see granddad again, your own dad?" And the man said, "I said to him that day what I said to him every time he asked me that question: 'Of course I'm going to see granddad again. That's what Jesus' resurrection is all about.'" And then he turned and he looked at the casket of his son: "I'm going to see you again, too." Grace, goodness, holiness. *Blessed are they who mourn.*

The Lord knows our hearts. He knows what we need. He knows we're in the mode of "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" as we just struggle to maneuver through life. But He knows that there's so much more that this life is about. In that moment, all of those people touched by the Lord, hearing a word that kind of lifted them up out of their grief and their despondency – I don't think anybody would leave there and say "That was holy" – although it was. But I think everybody who was there was *touched* by something they knew was *beyond them, and that the Lord was there*. Everybody felt that in the singing, in the praying. *Holiness is real*. You can feel it sometimes; you can see it sometimes; you can hear it sometimes. But the Lord wants us to believe that He will make us holy if we let Him.

Will you give Him permission? To come in and make you holy? Pope Benedict said we fear that, but we shouldn't – because He's not going to do something that is going to frighten us or overwhelm us. He's just going to come in and help us to become the men and the women we really want to be. That's what he's going to do if we let him – give Him permission.

And we say, "How can the God who made me seek permission from me?" He's quirky like that - but that's what He wants. He wants you to say, "Lord, come on in. You can do whatever you need to do. I want you to make me holy. I want to be good. I want to live in your grace, and I want to live forever."

May our Lord bless us all today and give us His peace.