

19 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. ³ You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. ⁴ Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

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^[a] among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood^[b] 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.

³² You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

³³ When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ 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 am the LORD your God.

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Jesus' Second Commandment: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Leviticus 19: 1-4, 9-18, 32-34; Mark 12:28-34

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Have you ever been accused of “cherry-picking” the Bible? It’s a phrase that tends to be used in a derogatory way by those who happen to be Biblical literalists. The critique put forward is that you are not honoring or living by all of scripture if you pick and choose to rank the verses that inspire you as more important, or choose to disregard either obscure texts or hurtful texts. It’s something we all do. In fact, when AJ Jacobs, a journalist in New York City attempted for a year to live by EVERY Biblical rule, it was not only funny but ridiculous what he discovered. Some of it being quite poignant about trying not to lie, or covet, or gossip and finding that difficult as a journalist living in New York City. But his quest to live as an ultra-fundamentalist for a time revealed that even the fundamentalists pick and choose what they decide to go by in scripture. He observed Hasidic Jews, the Amish, the snake-handlers, creationists and the regular old evangelists, seeing that none of them can or do completely follow every single rule! It’s a fun and funny book, “My Year of Living Biblically.” I recommend it. Jacobs is a good writer and took on this challenge seriously, and I think was moved in his faith commitment by doing so.

But I also recommend something even simpler: being “OK” with being a Christian who makes choices about how you interpret scripture. Though we are indeed “people of the book” – we are also people with God-given minds and hearts. It’s perfectly fine to use the gifts we’ve been given as people to interpret this book we call holy. Indeed, the whole idea of “cherry-picking” as a metaphor might help us decide this. Psychologist Valerie Tarico wrote for the Huffington Post in defense of cherry-picking when it comes to scripture.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/valerie-tarico/in-defense-of-cherry-pick_b_7305860.html) She says that perhaps it's a really good thing for us to do whether you are discussing texts or actual cherries. Dissecting the metaphor, she asks, if you had a cherry tree in your back yard, would you give ALL the cherries to your family no matter what condition they were in? Or, would you pick out the wormy ones, the rotten ones, and the sour ones before giving them to the people you care about? You want your friends and family to have good cherries, right? Don't you want the next generations of Christians to be able to glean the best wisdom from our sacred texts as well?

I also say this to be able to point out that Jesus himself was a cherry-picker of texts. Reading through Leviticus 19, it says a whole lot about how to treat the "other." It is also the chapter where we get rules about not letting your livestock breed across species, and planting single crops, and not wearing two different kinds of fabric, and how to appropriately cut your hair. We get legalistic rules about sexual relationships with slaves, and moralistic rules about not letting your daughters become prostitutes. I didn't read all of that earlier. Additionally, you may want to know that it says no to having tattoos and consulting wizards – no matter how good Harry Potter is in conveying the struggle between good and evil. Jesus likely knew ALL these rules, as did the scribe who was asking him which ones he thought was most important. But Jesus also knew the depth conveyed by this text - what it said about how you should treat your parents, the blind or deaf, your employees, the poor, the rich, the old, the immigrant, and then, he summed it up with pulling out just verse 18, part b to suggest as his second of the two laws that are more important than all the rest – you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

This, THIS is the segment that Jesus pulls from Leviticus, and it's beautiful. Now, I dare say that I can't think of another time in my 22 years of ministry that I've preached from the book of Leviticus. If I have, it wasn't here, and I don't remember doing it. Most of the time, if I heard

that someone was planning to preach from Leviticus, I would think they were planning on bashing their congregation with some obscure rule, probably about sexuality. Leviticus has a bunch of those. The purity codes about food and sex are strange to us and quite varied in this book of law. And yet, here I am, a bit surprised really to discover that Jesus takes the wisdom I think of as his best rules for living and pulls them not just from Moses' direct interaction with God, he gets this pure nugget of wisdom from one of the books I usually want to avoid for what it says about women, slaves, sexuality and seafood.

So, it is with great pride now that I think of our church as a gleefully cherry-picking congregation. I say this because I have observed that we live by these greatest commandments as the center of our life as a community. This is a congregation that has felt the call to love with an urgency not always present in every Christian church. That is to say, we favor those texts in our approach to many others. When we are making choices about how to administer funds, or start programs, or treat others in Ashland and beyond, I have no problem saying that we are going to go there first. Does what we plan to do pass the love test? Does the decision help us discover God's love on a deeper level? Does our choice connect us more intimately with our neighbors – allowing us to recognize them not as the “other” but as part of who we are ourselves? This call to love – to love God, and to know we are loved by God, to love our neighbors and to be loving toward ourselves. It's a gift.

And I was delighted this week to discover that this is a gift that has a long history behind it. Should I have known prior to this week that this was where some of Jesus' most famous words came from? Maybe – but it felt like new news, good news, and it's fun to me when I get surprised, still, by the amazing connections to be found in and across the Bible. As much as I would have easily tossed this difficult to understand book early in my ministry, I'm finding out

now that I don't need to throw out Leviticus. Jesus certainly didn't, even though he did choose to mine it for the best treasure it had to offer. It's an integral part of the Torah, the scriptures that Jesus read, studied, and taught in his own life and ministry. But, looking at it with my own new eyes, and through Jesus' eyes, it is not difficult to make the case that this conglomeration of laws points toward the larger goal of creating a community governed by God's guidance, and steeped in God's love. To adjust the contextual rules about tattoos, or food safety, or sexuality to make more sense in our own place and time isn't to deny the Bible's authority, but it is to interpret the Bible's authority in light of its more consistent and persistent messages.

And since this is yet another stewardship Sunday, here is your stewardship message. *You are the stewards, the keepers and interpreters and distributors of this deep spiritual message about who God is and who God has created us to be. The law and all that is in it teaches us, through Jesus Christ, to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.* That may seem like a super-obvious thing to say, but I'm not sure it always is. Churches can easily lose sight of this mission. That's why we were also instructed, early on, not to make any idols to worship, but to worship only God. We can too easily bow down at the altar of increasing church membership by any means necessary, or showing hospitality only to people who are just like us, or turning away from neighbors in need because it becomes too costly. Churches turn their traditions into idols without even blinking. If we begin to love anything we do or say too much – it's best to come back to these two great commandments. Our loves are directed rightly when they point us toward God, our neighbor, or being kinder and gentler with ourselves. Certainly, Jesus knew that keeping JUST these two laws would be hard enough to follow. Simple in words, but oh so hard to do.

The revelation of the Bible is sacred, not because it's meant to be preserved and locked into place from some earlier, better, more holy time. It's sacred inasmuch as it reveals the love of God that is grown through communities just like this one, committed to opening its pages and trying to make sense of its stories. When we love the Bible openly, it will open its teaching to us lovingly. It's not ours to close off from teaching us things that are new. So, if you do get told, at any time, and by anyone, particularly at a random holiday meal, that you have been cherry-picking your scripture texts, thank your critic for noticing. Tell them that it is your particular gift. You are willing to pour through scripture for those truths that hold all of it together and have made sense from the very beginning of creation and into today. And you, you as a steward of the gospel, are so willing to be led by it that you would be OK even if it changed some of your long-held beliefs, or idolatrous prejudices to open you more to God's love for humankind. So then, if you happen to be letting the rest of it go, so be it. Trust me, the Bible won't become instantaneously irrelevant because someone at Thanksgiving dinner finds out that your woman pastor has a tattoo and loves the abomination from the book of Leviticus known as crab dip. That would give us just a little too much power now, wouldn't it?

Have a blessedly fun Thanksgiving with family and friends, my good stewards of holy scripture, and proclaimers of God's love who have happened upon and connected with this blessed community of Ashland Presbyterian Church. Open your Bible, give thanks, and let it surprise you. If you open it in that spirit, it most certainly will invite you into the secrets it holds in plain sight. Jesus was both a scholar of the Torah, and an avid interpreter of its message. Let us be the same! Amen.