If I were to pass out pencils and paper this morning and ask you to describe St. Paul’s Church to a stranger, how would you respond? Among all the possible answers you might offer, I believe that no one would write, “We are a group of holy people.”

Although most of us don’t think twice about speaking or singing of God’s holiness, we shrink from thinking of ourselves as holy. Who are we, after all, to call ourselves holy? Biblically, the answer is: We don’t pronounce ourselves holy; it is God who calls us holy. Over and over in Leviticus, and elsewhere in the Bible, God’s people are described as holy.

I think we hesitate to call ourselves holy because we don’t fully understand what the word means. If I asked you to write a definition of holiness, you might answer, “perfect, sinless, or saint-like.” Those are not words I associate with myself. Or you might refrain from thinking of yourself as holy because of associations with those who act as if they are “Holier than thou”.

However, there is another definition of “holy” that we frequently use without reservation. We call things “holy” such as the Holy Bible, or holy water. We even refer to Pope Francis as “his holiness” without any reference to his moral character. We use the word “holy” quite easily in this fashion, referring to persons or things which are removed from the common uses of the world and set apart for the service or honor of God. This latter sense is far closer to the meaning of the Hebrew words we translate as “holy”. We can think of ourselves as “holy” simply because we have been touched by God and “set apart” for holy purpose.

Holiness is the definitive attribute of God. We are bold to think of ourselves as holy because God, the Holy One, in whose image we are made, invites us to grow in holiness. Think of how you have glimpsed God’s holiness in your life. Perhaps in the beauty of creation, or by experiencing the birth of a child; or witnessing an act of selfless love for another. Or perhaps you were touched by the holy when you received forgiveness from another when you felt you deserved only rejection. Maybe the holy was revealed by witnessing a person who embodies excellence in his or her vocation or art; or through the prophetic witness of people who envisioned a more just and inclusive world and, in love, endured sacrifice and pain to bring it to pass. In whatever way we have witnessed the “holy”, when we are touched in this way by the presence of God, we experience the hope and peace that is God’s will for creation.

There is an ancient Hasidic tale in which a rabbi asked his students, when, at dawn, can one tell the light from the darkness. One student replied; “when I can tell a goat from a donkey”. “No”, answered the rabbi. Another said; “when I can tell a palm tree from a fig”. “No”, the rabbi answered again. “Well, then, what is the answer?”
“Not until you look into the face of every man and every woman and see your brother and your sister”, said the rabbi. “Only then have you seen the light. All else is still darkness.”

According to Leviticus, an amazing thing about being God’s “holy people” is that the experience produces the need to be ethical. The verses following God’s pronouncement of holiness are all concerned with actions that show our care for our neighbor. To behave ethically in this world, to not glean every inch of your field, to be intentionally sloppy in the harvest so that the poor and the alien have something to eat, is the remarkable sense resulting from contact with the holy.

Being holy means to be more interested in your neighbor as a person than as a source of profit so one doesn’t withhold wages earned, even overnight. Being touched by holiness means seeing God in one’s neighbor and seeking his or her wellbeing; loving my neighbor as I love myself. Furthermore, the golden rule is not limited only to my neighbor. In Lev. 19:33-34 we read, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

It has been a little over three weeks since President Trump issued his executive order regarding immigration and travel, particularly as it affects Muslims from seven Middle East countries. Around the nation and the world the reaction by supporters and opponents of the order has been strong. For now the decision by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals provides temporary relief for those impacted by the order. This weekend’s news contained reports of possible deportation scenarios being considered by our government. At this morning’s adult forum we will have an opportunity to hear of the ramifications on those affected from Joe Cimperman and I commend this offering to you. I also commend to your prayerful reading the statement issued by Bishop Hollingsworth on this issue.

Recognizing the broad range of opinion among us on this issue I want to direct your attention to how we engage with one another when we disagree. Again in Leviticus we hear these words, “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.” And in our Gospel reading we hear these well known, but less well followed words of Jesus, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Elizabeth Palmer comments, “It’s not immediately clear what it means, this command to reprove our neighbors. It probably doesn’t mean what I want it to mean on my worst days—that I have a free pass for rendering angry judgments or wishing ill will against anyone whose views are opposed to mine simply because of how they vote or what rhetoric they use to describe their view of the world. After all, the first half of the verse tells us not to harbor hatred in our hearts. When I find myself harboring anything resembling hatred against those I label as hating others, I’m neither pleasing God nor contributing positively to the world’s healing. But it also doesn’t mean that we are to stand by quietly .... To reprove as God commands means neither to abstain from judgment nor to judge willy-nilly.”
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments on how we are to fulfill the command not to succumb to hatred, “The Torah’s answer is: Speak. Converse. Challenge. Remonstrate. It may be that the other person had a good reason for doing what he did. Or it may be that he was acting out of malice, in which case our remonstration will give him, if he so chooses, the opportunity to apologize, and we should then forgive him. In either case”, Sacks concludes, “talking it through is the best way of restoring a broken relationship."

If we fail to communicate with those with whom we disagree, that failure is often a prelude to revenge. Jesus is concerned with how harboring hatred rather than engaging someone with whom we disagree affects us. But what about the person who is unwilling to engage with us; the person who resorts to the echo chamber of social media anonymity? Or an abusive person in whose presence we do not feel safe?

Brother John Braught of the Society of St. John the Evangelist reminds us of Jesus’ admonition to pray, writing, “And because above all we need God’s help, we can also pray for the person with whom we feel angry, or judgmental. I don’t just mean once or haphazardly, but intentionally and continuously. Pray for that person that they might receive everything you want for yourself, peace of mind, a better relationship with God, health, security, prosperity, and happiness. Even if you don’t really want it for them, and your prayer is just empty words, say it anyway. Persist, and see if you don’t really come to mean it.”

Leviticus reminds us that reproving to achieve reconciliation, and accepting such reproof, is holy work. Holiness is not something that we can achieve on our own, and if we try to do so, it is easy to fall into sin, adopting a “holier-than-thou” attitude. Holiness is the work of God in and among us, for the sake of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“You shall be holy.” It is both a command and a promise. As we commit ourselves to practicing the disciplines of holiness—seeing others as brothers and sisters, working for their wellbeing, seeking to talk it out when we have conflicts and praying for enemies when we can’t enter into dialogue—God promises that we will grow into the fullness of God’s love and holiness.

In closing, let me share these words from Bishop Hollingsworth’s pastoral letter, “It is important, as we wrestle with issues of immigration and national security, that your and my voices, whatever our perspectives, are heard by one another and by our leaders, and that the seriousness of our commitment to democracy and peace is observed by the world. More importantly, let us remember that we are Christian, not among other things, but above all things. ...we are called to grow into the full stature of the Christ whose name we bear and whose very body we are, to the end that we and all the beloved of God may be ‘no longer strangers and sojourners, but...fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.’”