

Sermon: Holy Rage

Year A, Epiphany 7

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48](#)

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On Tuesday, I had one of those days when three different news stories seemed to combine into a uniquely personal ball of confusion that I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to do about. And maybe if this week's Scripture passages hadn't been the passage from Leviticus and the passage from Matthew, I would have just let it go as one of those weird coincidences.

The news stories were all sports stories. I know. Hard to believe there were news stories that weren't political stories this week. Once Carol has a chance to get to it, she'll post a copy of my sermon and it will have links to the stories if you want to read them.

[The first](#) was about the UConn women's team winning 100 games in a row.¹ Women's Division 1 basketball has never been more competitive. Women athletes have never been more talented. We are only 45 years into Title IX, which leveled the playing field for women. And still UConn has blown away the NCAA record for consecutive wins. Christine Brennan, a great sports reporter, said in the interview, that she's thought about it and she'd argue that Title IX, which was signed into law in 1972 by Richard Nixon, was the most important piece of legislation in the last 45 years. I'm not sure I agree with her, but I would totally pay to sit in an auditorium at Harvard Law and listen to the debate.

So the first story is the UConn women and Title IX. Let's put that over there.

Later in the day, I was reading a story about the [Archdiocese of New Jersey and basketball played by 10 and 12 year old girls](#).² In one school a 12 year old girl was the only girl who wanted to play basketball, so she played with the boys. Until she was expelled, because she wouldn't quit the team. Her parents had to sue to have her re-enrolled at her school. Same Archdiocese, different team, this time it was 10 year olds playing in a youth league. This time there were only two girls who wanted to play, again, not enough to field a girls team, so they had been playing with the boys. The Archdiocese told the team that they had to get the girls to quit or forfeit the game. So the team took a vote and did what the Archdiocese had asked. They forfeited. The local WNBA team, the New York Liberty, invited the 12 year old, her best friend and her sister to come to a work out with them. Because they said, "a woman's place is on the court." The ten years old had an inter-team scrimmage wearing t shirts that said "Unity" and had a pizza party on the night when they had to forfeit their game. There is something troubling that we are still debating whether girls should play basketball. But there is something enormously reassuring that 10 year old boys have got it figured out.

So the second story is the 10 and 12 year old girls playing basketball in New Jersey.

¹ *Morning Edition*, NPR, February 14, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/14/515138540/uconn-women-make-basketball-history-100-consecutive-wins> (accessed 16 February 2017).

² Katie Mettler, "Basketball Revolt: Make the Girls Quit or Forfeit, N.J. Archdiocese Told Grade Schoolers. They Forfeited." *Washington Post*, February 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/14/basketball-revolt-make-the-girls-quit-or-forfeit-an-n-j-archdiocese-told-grade-schoolers-they-forfeited/?utm_term=.3759a372814f (accessed 16 February 2017).

The [third story comes from USA Taekwondo](#),³ which is the national organization that trains the athletes we send to the Olympics. An athlete, now 23, described how her coach who was 44 abused her when she was 16. I'm not going to go into the details of the story, because there was nothing new here. A person with absolute power over the career path of someone younger and powerless takes advantage of his power and then denies there is an issue. We've all heard this story too many times. Based on national statistics, there is probably someone in this room this morning who has lived this story. This young woman worried that the coach would hurt other girls he was coaching, so she went public. She raised the issue, provided evidence, from what the story said, she turned the other cheek, and gave away her cloak and went the extra mile. And everyone just took one big step back. Including the United States Olympic Committee.

We have all heard how much power Olympic coaches have over the athletes who might make the team. They can be drunk with power, throwing people off the team for no reason, simply to intimidate others. So the article explained that there is something called the Stevens Act which was put in place so that the sports' governing bodies couldn't just ban someone without a public hearing, whether that person was an athlete, coach or official. You know where this is going. When an athlete gathers the courage to name her abuser and attempt to keep him from hurting anyone else, the sports' governing bodies are so afraid of being sued that they tell the athlete that they are obligated to convene a panel, a panel which the athlete knows perfectly well will re-traumatize her. There was a quote in the article that linked all these stories for me. If the athlete had been a college athlete bringing a complaint under Title IX, there are procedures in place to get at the truth without further traumatizing potential victims.

The US Olympic Committee has \$320 million in revenue every year. It has committed to contributing \$8.3 million over five years to a program to combat this kind of abuse, which it has yet to implement, in part because it says it's having trouble raising \$17.6 million more. The Canadians had their program in place in 1998, the Danes in 2001, the Brits in 2002. When you ask the USOC why they don't act on behalf of the athletes, they deny having any athletes. It's the national governing bodies, like USA Taekwondo, that have the athletes. There's nothing the USOC can do. Although when an athlete like Ryan Lochte embarrasses them, it seems they can do something.

So where do I go with this? There are so many problems in this world which don't have a solution. Some of them we can't even agree they're problems. Abusing children, we can all agree is problem. Is there an alternative? Yes, 10 year olds in New Jersey understand that sports can make you a better person and no one should be denied the chance to become the person from the discipline and team work that sports can foster. Are there the resources? As a business woman who spent some portion of her career looking at how to fund internet start ups, I promise you, pulling \$25 million out of a \$320 million annual budget is easy, especially if you can spread it over five years. Do we know what to spend those resources on? Yes. Sadly, yes. It has happened often enough that we know how to respond to this kind of abuse inside sports and out. So the bottom line for me, when I sum it all up, is that there is no excuse. And excuses are what

³ Will Hobson and Steven Rick, "An Athlete Accused Her Coach of Sex Abuse. Olympic Officials Stayed on the Sideline." *Washington Post*, February 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/an-athlete-accused-her-coach-of-sex-abuse-olympic-officials-stayed-on-sideline/2017/02/14/35a6fc76-d2eb-11e6-a783-cd3fa950f2fd_story.html?utm_term=.0414f358d73b (accessed 16 February 2017).

the USOC is offering right after they say, “The prevention of abuse has been, and will continue to be, a high priority for us.”

Where do I go with this rage? Write to my elected officials? Right now and for the foreseeable future, every single member of Congress is going to be pretty much flat out. The Olympic Committee? The only reason they’re not the most corrupt sports organization in the world is because FIFA exists. USA Taekwondo? I wouldn’t know what taekwondo was on a bet. And even if somehow USA Taekwondo is straightened out, do we have to go sport by sport to fix a problem we’re already addressing just about everywhere else?

Now I get that this is my rage. And my problem. And you’re not here to be my personal therapists. But we all have something like this. Something that just enrages us, not simply because it is so stupid, but because we are called by God to care for the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens among us. The rage comes because there is so much in this life that will only be made right when God’s Kingdom arrives on this earth. The rage comes when we recognize that a particular problem is not one of those and we are not even admitting that it exists, let alone that we can solve it.

So here’s where I am for right now. It may change by noon today, or noon ten years from now. Given that the three stories come from NPR and *The Washington Post*, I am confident that millions of other people saw them. So there is nothing special about me seeing them. I am enough of a scientist to recognize that. But I also believe that God laid them on my heart in such a way that they are hooked together and hooked to me in a way that is unique. And I believe that God gave them to me this week, so I could look at the rage they produced in light of this week’s Scripture passages.

Last week, I spent more time in the commandment section of the Leviticus reading. This week, I want to look at the first two sentences that introduced them. *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 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.* (Leviticus 19:1-2) God’s talking to everyone,⁴ *all the congregation*, no exceptions, the athletes and coaches, the parents and kids, the administrators and the fans. *You shall be holy* is in the imperative, it’s a command. *You shall be holy*. And it’s a reassurance.⁵ Despite all indications to the contrary, you *shall be holy*, for I the LORD your God am holy. We don’t like that idea at all. We have phrase for that, “holier than thou.”⁶ God is holy, maybe Mother Teresa and few super special people. But we’re not holy and we’re not going to be holy. The passage from Leviticus says that isn’t the case. We are all holy, all created in God’s image, we are called to be holy, or more specifically, we are called to do holy acts, like making sure that there is always some grain left in the field or grapes in the vineyard.⁷ We are called to do holy acts, like voting to forfeit a game rather than play without our teammates of four years. Holiness is not something that makes you glow in the dark, wearing white clothes that you never spill coffee on. Holiness is what you do.

⁴ Kimberly L. Clayton, “Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Homiletical Perspective, Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 365.

⁵ Sheldon W. Sorge, “Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Theological Perspective, Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 364.

⁶ Clayton, 365

⁷ Clayton, 365.

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. (Leviticus 19:2) The more you hang out with me, your God, the more like me you will become. Not only are we made in God's image, we take on some of God's otherness. We are a part of humanity, but we are set apart from it.⁸ We turn the other cheek, we hand over our cloak, we go the extra mile, we lend when asked, we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. (Matthew 5:39-44). That doesn't sound like humanity. That sounds like the otherness of God. That sounds impossible. That sounds like a recipe for failure.⁹ If it were just us, alone, that's all it would be, impossibility and then failure.

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. (Leviticus 19:2). *You may be children of your Father in heaven* (Matthew 5:45). We are not doing this alone. We are doing it with God. What are we doing when we turn the other cheek, and offer the cloak, go the extra mile, lend to those who beg, love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? We are staying engaged with this world in all its deformities.

If we were not holy like the LORD our God is holy, we would walk away from the USOC, and say, "Whatever. Bring back the hardware from Tokyo and if a few girls have their lives rototilled on the way, we get it. It's just the price of the medal count." Part of doing what Jesus calls us to do, as impossible as it is, is to stay engaged. The rage can be holy too, if it turns into action, if it turns into doing. And if there is nowhere for the rage to go now, then perhaps the best we can ask for is that the rage stays alive until we walk the needed miles and shed the cloaks, and love the unlovable, until we find the thing to do that will allow justice to be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. For we shall be holy like the LORD our God is holy.

⁸ Sorge, 364.

⁹ Jason Byassee, "Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Theological Perspective, Matthew 5:38-48" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 382.