

Sunday, March 4, 2018
3rd Week of Lent

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SERMON



Exodus 20:1-17

INTRODUCTION:

Three months after the Hebrew people were liberated from Pharaoh's oppressive slavery, Moses was summoned by God atop Mount Sinai. It was time to organize God's people around clear behavioral expectations - a "quick-start guide" for creating a thriving culture focused on the common good of all people. God said to Moses,

"If you will diligently listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine, and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Three days later, God spoke through Moses to the gathered tribes of Israel. Here we glimpse God's defining vision of the way biblical faith is lived out in the world. These words in Exodus chapter 20 reveal a passionate God love for a people chosen to be a "light to the world." Seen from this point of view, the Ten Commandments are not simply a checklist of rights and wrongs, but rather a gift from God, given to shape lives that are sincere in their calling as God's beloved. In this context, properly understood, they provide encouragement to humanity and structure a world that embodies God's kingdom.

God spoke all these words written in the Book of Exodus Chapter twenty.



SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:1-17

I am the Lord Your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery;
You shall have no other gods before me.
You shall not make for yourself an idol,
whether in the form of anything
that is in heaven above,
or that is on the earth beneath,
or that is in the water under the earth.
You shall not bow down to them or worship them;
for I the Lord Your God am a jealous God,
punishing children for the iniquity of parents,
to the third and the fourth generation
of those who reject me,
but showing steadfast love
to the thousandth generation
of those who love me and keep my commandments.
You shall not make wrongful use
of the name of the Lord Your God,
for the Lord will not acquit anyone
who misuses the name of God.
Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work.
But the 7th day is a Sabbath to the Lord Your God;
you shall not do any work —
you, your son or your daughter,
your male or female slave,
your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.
For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
but rested the seventh day;
therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day
and consecrated it. (NOTE: God made it holy, sacred, set apart)
Honor your father and your mother,
so that your days may be long in the land
that the Lord Your God is giving you.
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet
your neighbor's house;
your neighbor's spouse,
or slaves,
or ox, or donkey,
or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Back in the 1960's I was sent to all of the Catholic training and catechism classes that were required by the church. I was even an alter boy for a while. It didn't work out too well. I mumbled & slurred my Latin because I had no clue what these sounds coming out of my mouth meant. Secondly, because I really had no idea what the priest was saying, I often messed up my cues. I'd ring the bell in the wrong spot and mess up the various props I was supposed to bring the Priest. It was a comfort to all of us that I was allowed to resign my position.

It was during this boyhood time that I was taught the 10 commandments. I'll bet many of you were taught them when you were very young too. I knew they were really important and I always loved the movie version but honestly, they may have been taught to me in Latin too. All I really knew was this was the *Great Celestial Check List* God would use to measure the weight of HIS disapproval of me and then inflict corrective punishment and penance from the dark, shadowed box they called the confessional. This was very scary stuff for a 8 year old!

I do remember though, feeling oddly clean, somehow fresh and forgiven for whatever "sins" I made up to tell the faceless shadow on the other side of the confessional screen. Even in my misunderstanding there was some holy mystery that pierced through my ignorance. But this was how I came to view the Biblical God as an old, grumpy, stern, male, scorekeeper of good and bad behavior.

That childhood understanding of the 10 commandments stuck with me for a very long time. I think many of us who grew up in church and even those who didn't view the 10 commandments that way. We've seen the movie and know they're important but like naming Snow White's Seven Dwarfs, we really can't recite them. On top of that, when you unpack them, they are not very clear in what they mean exactly. They each require interpretation. For Orthodox Jews, keeping the Sabbath Day holy means you can not even turn a light switch on. The other contentious law is "Thou Shalt Not Murder". You would think that is as clear as it gets but many faithful and sincere God faring people will argue that killing in a war is okay or that God actually sanctions capital punishment.

Like everything in Scripture we are each invited to interpret what these words really mean. This then invites arguments and seeds all kinds of trouble. Rigid factions develop and we then seek out like-minded churches and agreeable denominations that coincide with our specific interpretation. Even the Biblical narrative itself continues from Exodus 20 to expound on these 10 commands with literally hundreds of interpreted laws, rules and regulations that instruct us how to live a life that is pleasing and acceptable to God. It can be reasonably said that the entire Torah is based on the foundation laid in these 10 commandments. You probably remember how Jesus paired the Ten Commandments down rather than amplify them with more laws.

Jesus said, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a

second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40).

Personally I find this to be the single best lens in which to interpret all scripture, all religion and spiritual practice. Through this lens I see that the first three commandments tell us how to love God and the last six give clear direction on loving my neighbor. In the end it all boils down to how we might live together in harmony. In the Divine realm, the quality and health of our relationships is singularly critical. I hope you are discovering that too in your Lenten Small Group work.

It can be challenging to deconstruct our deep seeded ideas about God from our childhood and question the quite but powerful assumptions we hold. However, this is the continuing journey of a faith that seeks greater understanding. I have come to see that when I begin with the idea that God yearns to draw us into a loving, intimate relationship, suddenly I hear the commandments differently. I no longer see them as a grumpy old man's Celestial Check List of dos and don'ts but rather a glimpse into God's direction for an abundant life. The 10 commandments are not arbitrary prohibitions. They are the guidelines and limits that point us to how we might actually live just life that can embody and practice grace and celebrate the dignity of anybody.

Through the lens of love, the 10 commandments become an amazing gift that guides us through the complexes and uncertainties we all encounter in everyday life. This Biblical God has actually gifted us with the Celestial guidebook on how to nurture and grow beyond an abstract idea of divinity into a tangible, everyday, substantive intimacy with the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit of our Living God!

As we continue this Lent to Tend the Garden of Relationships, I hope we will continue to find transformative meaning in God's direction for the building up our mutual human integrity, the beauty and sanctity of all living things and the ability to see the Divine blessing and sanctifying it all. Amen