

sermon 21.03.07

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

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 his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh 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.

Honour 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 neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

SERMON

Growing up, I was not taught that the reading we just heard was a gift; a gift given to the people of God, meant to promote life. Life in relationship with God and one another.

For me, and for many of you, too, the 10 commandments meant no swearing, no talking back to my parents, Sundays were pretty boring - no shopping, no movies, no this that and the other thing, and then there were mysterious words, like 'do not covet your neighbor's wife'. Looks like Dracula, in the children's time, also wasn't sure about that one. Mostly they were a bunch of rules that were meant to keep us in line.

A gift given to promote life and relationship? Not the message I heard.

Let's turn again to the context of these laws -

These words, handed down to the people through the prophet Moses, were given to a community who has just recently stepped out from under the yoke of slavery. For generation upon generation, the Israelites had been held captive by the Egyptians - they are a community whose identity was shaped by forced labor and oppression.

Here, in our reading today, these former slaves are finally settling into a new way of life. Just months after escaping the brutality of Pharaoh, they are figuring out what it means to live not under the god of death - Pharaoh, but in relationship with the God of Life, Yahweh.

And so before giving the rules of right living, God reminds the people to whom they belong:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"

God starts by reminding the people of this saving act - God's bringing them from bondage to freedom.

Before the law comes the declaration - You are mine. I brought you out of Slavery.

Don't forget this.

What's imperative for us to remember is that these commands, these rules of life, they were given after the God of Life, Yahweh, rescued the people from slavery. Grace and freedom came before the law.

Let me say that again, because it's something we often miss when reading the Old Testament: Grace and freedom came before the law.

The laws handed down to Moses were given to the 'insiders', those who had already experienced God's miraculous, saving, love. These laws were not given as a way to earn your way into God's love. The grace and freedom of belonging already happened. These laws proclaim to liberated slaves, you're free, free to worship me, the creator God who rescued you from oppression, because I'm faithful to the promise made to your ancestors. YOU ARE MINE.

These commandments are how people who have been freed by the living God are to live. They are a gift.

They are meant to promote life. Life in relationship with God and one another.

God gives us the law to promote life. And living in right relationship with God and each other is done primarily through keeping God first in our lives, and loving our neighbor.

All of us, from those ancient Israelites up to you and me; we are all born with brokenness as part of our very being. God gives the law to us to work towards healing our brokenness. This healing happens in tangible ways - how we treat those around us - our neighbors.

And here's what loving your neighbor looks like:

Honor the elderly, make sure everybody gets time to rest, don't kill, don't steal, don't bear false witness against your neighbor. don't commit adultery, don't covet your neighbor's house or spouse .

God tells us to study this law and put it into practice, honor God and love the ones in your midst.

In Galatians 5:14, the Apostle Paul said, the entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself. This Love that Paul talks about is not about emotions. It's about what you do and don't do to your neighbor. "The entire law is summed up" summed up - the bottom line of the entire law is about loving your neighbor.

God gives us the law to promote life. And living in right relationship with God and each other is done through loving our neighbor.

So what does this mean for us today?

My friends - all of us - every single one of us is called to take seriously the ways in which we join in God's work of bringing Life to this broken world.

And here's where it gets complicated for me - as a person of faith and as your pastor. The tension I hold for myself and in my call to you, is this balance of doing and being. Being and doing. A wise friend, with whom I was exploring a scripture around Jesus' healing ministry the other day, said 'our doing needs to come out of our being'. Our doing needs to come out of our being.

Yes. Jesus' power to heal, to feed, to do his work, came out of a deep sense of being rooted in relationship with God. I imagine the words Jesus heard as he came up out of the water at his baptism - "You are my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased", those words kept him rooted in his 'being-ness'. He was loved by God simply in being who he was.

And, and - research shows that when we *do* - when we get involved in helping others, that doing allows us to experience a life giving sense of belonging. Doing for others connects us to God and neighbor.

This tension of the relationship between being and doing is one that I wrestle with mightily. I don't know the answer. It's an ongoing tension that is important for each of us to engage with.

In the spring of 1963, in Birmingham Alabama, as the civil rights protests became more and more heated, with both police and civil brutality increasing, everyone engaged in the protests was required to sign a commitment card with 10 commandments, yes 10 commandments. Here's what they had to commit to to be a part of that community:

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the non—violent movement seeks justice and reconciliation — not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

I sign this pledge, having seriously considered what I do and with the determination and will to persevere.¹

This commitment involved taking up a daily practice of courtesy, love, service, meditation and prayer. It required both being and doing. Being and doing as a way of serving God and loving the neighbor - the one being beaten and the one doing the harm.

God, grant me the grace to have such courage to love and serve!

¹ https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/_files/resources/MLK_Commitment_Card.pdf

These past months, I've come to see how my white privilege allows me to focus more on my being than my doing. My reality is such that I don't suffer nearly as much as so many of my black and brown neighbors, near and far, and so I have the option to shut down and pull inward.

How do those of us with privileges of various kinds, how do we balance the being and doing, while faithfully living into God's commands?

The Birmingham pledge gives us a clue as to how to bring some balance - it required a radical commitment of those every day people who engaged in that work of the kingdom. Pray, study, recognize that everyone is my neighbor, Every One. Those 10 commandments feel relevant still.

We may not be called to sit at lunch counters or march across bridges, risking our lives, but the opportunities to serve God and our neighbors are literally endless - we heard today from Bridge of Hope. That's one of the many programs that need support - some of us are involved in prison ministry, some work to feed and shelter the homeless here in Centre County, others work on environmental injustice issues- the list goes on.

The need can feel overwhelming - And this is on top of the ever shifting landscape of COVID which depletes us and wears us down.

I ask each one of you to join me in prayerful discernment - first rooting ourselves in God's love and then considering how God is asking you to love your neighbor at this point in your life.

These laws given by God to a people just out of slavery were a gift - a way of being in a life giving relationship with God and with one another.

This is the God who first freed the people from slavery - and then invited them into a deeper covenantal relationship through the law.

Grace came before the law. Being came before doing. But the being and the doing relied on each other.

As we hold that tension of being and doing, of discerning how God calls us to authentically live into these principles for life, I want you to listen to this song. This song was born out of a town hall meeting around coal ash, where testimony after testimony was shared about how low income black, brown and white families suffered - suffered in tangible ways, from the coal ash being dumped in their backyards. May the God of Life show us the way.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC4zXt7X1XE&feature=emb_title

Commitment Card

Martin Luther King, Jr.

1963

I hereby pledge myself—my person and body—to the nonviolent movement. Therefore I will keep the following ten commandments:

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the non—violent movement seeks justice and reconciliation — not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.

10. Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

I sign this pledge, having seriously considered what I do and with the determination and will to persevere.

Name_____ Address_____

Phone_____ Nearest Relative_____

Address_____

Besides demonstrations, I could also help the movement by (Circle the proper items):

Run errands, Drive my car, Fix food for volunteers, Clerical work, Make phone calls,
Answer phones, Mimeograph, Type, Print Signs, Distribute leaflets.

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