

Third Sunday in Lent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 03-07-2021

Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

If you have grown up in the Christian Church you probably have at some time been asked to memorize the 10 Commandments. Pop quiz, can anyone recite all 10? Extra points for getting them in order.

My experience of memorizing these “laws” came when I was in the fifth grade and preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, the adult affirmation of Baptismal faith. The 10 commandments were part of the catechism, only one of many things to memorize. In typical fashion, I memorized them because I was required to do so but I did not understand them. We may have discussed them in class but I don’t remember. If we did it was most likely more along the lines of “definition”, explaining to 11 year olds what “adultery” was and what it meant to “covet”

My reaction to the 10 Commandments was perhaps not unusual. They frightened me. When I heard thou shalt not... I also heard the unspoken “or else”. In my mind it went something like this. Thou shalt not steal...or else. Or else you will be sorry. Or else there will be punishment. The “or else” was never clearly defined but the God I knew in those days was the angry looking old man in a nightgown, a man with long hair and a beard. So the “or else” part was believable. It wasn’t until much later as an adult that I came to understand these words we call commandments differently.

I have come to understand that the central conviction of Christianity is not around rules and punishment but around human life lived before God. Human life as God designed and created it has order, structure and community. What for centuries we have called Commandments, and laws actually in the Hebrew can be more correctly rendered Teaching or Direction. In earliest times they were simply 10 words which came to be expanded and embellished. God did not set up a list of rules and sit back waiting for us to transgress so that God could say “Gottcha”. Instead the two stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were a map for living.

The map or instruction was necessary, because the Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt and suddenly they were free. They had been slaves for so long they did not know how human beings were created by God to live. And so they needed direction. We have not been slaves in Egypt but we too need instruction, a map for the way in which God would have us live. Why? The collect for today which we prayed earlier says it best. “Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves:” begins the prayer. While we are not physically slaves to a foreign master, left to our own devices, human beings can become enslaved by many things. When this happens we have little or no power to help ourselves without God. It is why Alcoholics Anonymous speaks of relying on a “higher power”.

The prayer continues: “Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we might be defended from all adversities...”. Notice that we prayed that God would ‘keep us...’. This is not a one-time inoculation against those things which enslave or harm us. “Keep us”

implies that we continue our whole lives long to need God's help in following the path created for us to be healthy and productive.

Moses went up the mountain to receive God's instructions for how the people of Israel were to live and thrive in the Promised Land. There were ten words inscribed on stone tablets and placed in the ark of the Covenant so that Israel would always know what God desired of them. These were not simply moral principles though they are often reduced to such. These words were the way of life itself.

The 10 words, were divided into two parts. The first four instructions were about how to live before God and concern our relationship with the Creator, a relationship grounded in God's love for us. When we see these words as teaching or direction instead of law we open up the possibility of responding to God's love with love of our own. The first direction, having no other God but God protects us from anything coming between ourselves and God. The 2nd direction, against idols is designed to ensure that we will not think we can control God. It is meant to remind us of who is the Creator and who the created. The 3rd instruction, prohibiting taking God's name in vain recognizes the power in a name. To invoke Gods name is to invoke the power of God not something to be done idly, lightly or in anger.

The fourth instruction, which directs us to keep holy the sabbath is unique. It is the foundation of the other nine, even though it is not first in the numerical list. Scripture scholar Jon Dominic Crossan contends that this instruction is rooted in the Creation itself. In six days God created the world and all that is in it. On the seventh day, the sabbath, God rested. But more than simply stopping work, God blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. if you read the complete instruction surrounding sabbath rest you will find that it includes everyone and everything. "...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." Sabbath rest was originally in God's eyes not simply time for worship but worship itself. Crossan goes on to point out that everything was included and everything had equal weight and worth in God's eyes. Distributive justice is the term to describe the equality of original creation. Crossan again. "The Sabbath makes holy, hallows, sanctified and consecrates the entire creation, because it places the justice of equality as the crown of creation."

The second tablet contained the 6 instructions can be said to be rooted in those areas concerning our relationship with God. These 6 deal with the relationship between human beings within the community and are given to protect the community.

The 5th instruction, honoring father and mother insures the uninterrupted flow of tradition from one generation to another. It insures that the story of who we are and who God is are transmitted from parent to child. This is the commandment of continuity.

The instructions forbidding murder, adultery, theft, and false witness continue this protection of the community. When practiced these enable the community to continue to exist in love and relationship with one another as well as with God. When they are ignored people are not safe within their community and the whole communal structure is weakened.

In speaking of what we call the Ten Commandments, one scholar put it thus: “There is an internal logic to the commandments that is both compelling and beautiful: The way we attend to God shapes the way we attend to our neighbor. “

Jesus, centuries later said it simply and memorably. When asked what was the first and greatest commandment, his reply was “Love the Lord your God and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.”