

Lent III, March 4, 2018 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Exodus 20:1-17 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

Its another "Big Picture" day today! All the readings invite us to ask "What really matters?" How we answer that question will tell the tale of who we are as individuals and as a people.

The answering isn't an intellectual one – Paul makes that quite clear in the passage we have from his letter today – the answering comes in actions: how we treat the people in our lives, how we treat all of the creation, human and non-human, and how we hold ourselves and each other accountable in the shared journey – that's the only way to answer, the only really important answer.

What is the appropriate way to act? In a God-breathed, God-designed universe, alignment with God's vision is the foundation of social and personal morality and well-being. That's why it's so important that we're extremely careful about interpreting exactly what God's vision is, and how it's revealed!

What really matters? Relationships! Relationships with God, with humankind, and with the non-human world. That's at the core of the Exodus message, which is an invitation to live in such a way that the lives of all people – and the existence of all things – is enhanced and celebrated.

That's not often how the 10 Commandments are thought of – as enhancing and celebrating all of creation! In part, that's because we often have faulty assumptions about what exactly the Commandments are! Not only are there at least 2 different lists of 10 commandments, there are also shorter lists: Micah has three: Do justice, love kindness, bring your life into accord with God's vision for humanity and all of creation. (walk humbly with your God). And if you count, you'll find 613 different commandments in the Old Testament: 365 "you shall not," and 248 "you shall" ones. You can subdivide them differently than that, too: into three categories of laws, testimonies, and decrees. Even when the ones about the now non-existent 2nd Temple and about biblical Israel are dropped, we're still left with a dizzying 245 Commandments – are you with me still?!! I have to say that I have trouble listing even the 10 off the top of my head – forget 245!!.

My invitation to you is not to get too hung up on seeing the 10 Commandments as an exclusive set of rules but, perhaps, a handy-dandy pocket guide to the larger story of human behavior in the context of the Divine-Human relationship. They're a convenient summary of already existing codes of behavior that provide parameters for our relationships: they offer us a vision of a wholesome way to live.

If you can do that, then things become clearer. For example, no matter the usual, often legalistic, interpretations the Ten begin with the divine-human relationship that's at the heart of the Covenant – begun with the rainbow, continued with Abraham and Sarah, centered on God's unique relationship with a wilderness people who, because of God's actions, are an already an elected, redeemed, believing, and worshipping community.

God's graceful liberation and deliverance from slavery undergirds each of the commandments; they're reminders to the people that grace requires a response. That's a takeaway for us: that God's fidelity calls forth our fidelity and relationship with God and each other. If the former slaves have been saved by divine power and love, they now need to live up to the values of the divine community they have now become. And the same is true for us: saved by divine power and love, we are called to live up to the values of the divine community that we entered through baptism.

Following God in all things orders our priorities and values, and places them in the widest possible ethical and spiritual context. If we love the creator rightly, we will appropriately love creation. We will find ourselves fellow companions with one another, not self-ruled individualists, accountable only to ourselves, and heedless of our impact on the environment.

Jesus' actions in today's gospel passage are all about just that: loving God and creation, and so challenging those who by their actions are disrespecting God and abusing creation. This is a picture of an angry, passionate Jesus, willing to practice civil-disobedience to restore a place intended to be sacred and holy to that state of sacred holiness. The Temple is to be a place of worship, not profiteering, not a place to be exploited for one's own selfish purposes. Jesus was concerned about the integrity of, the morality of the 1st Century economic system.

Should that be different for us? God is concerned about our economics. As one writer has said, "While profit has its place in securing well-being for ourselves and our families, profit-making [must be] governed by the ethics of time, place, and person. Economics are to be conducted as if "people really mattered." (Epperly). We're called to join together love of God and of creation; that means that appropriate perspective for people of faith is that our economics are intended to heal the earth and the human family.

That's not the current reality of our economic system. "Trickle down" doesn't. Our cultural values are currently far from the relational vision of Ten Commandments, and of Jesus' words and actions. Today, the cultural vision of some – many? – in this nation is that generosity, fairness, and insuring a social safety net seem impractical and almost un-American.

Our own well-being is personal and individual. How we spend our money is private, and without ethical implications, whether in our personal lives or our influence on the political system. Taxes are cut with minimal benefits to any but the most wealthy, cuts that will only further erode the social safety net and increase the gap between the rich and poor. Despite another school shooting, gun rights and property rights trump personal safety, and profit eclipses the well-being of employees.

Today's scriptures are proposing an alternate vision: care for the vulnerable is not optional. Caring for the least of these is God's demand, whether in economic or religious life. Our Religious institutions should be the primary proponents of the common good – and I shouldn't have to say that! What we have is on loan to us as stewards; what we have is not our own; it falls under a broader and deeper ethic of holiness and social wellness. We're called to promote behaviors that look beyond self-interest, behaviors that bring healing to the world in all its

diversity. Our faith's call is for us to seek a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

For us, today's readings are not about two tablets inscribed with ten words. Not about 2nd Temple Judaism's religious practices. Today we're offered readings that embody a holistic faith, one that joins theology, ethics, spirituality, economics, and public policy. They suggest that religion and politics really do mix, but in ways that challenge liberals and conservatives alike.

Neither the Wilderness Wanderers' understanding of the relationship of God and values, nor Jesus' understanding, are historical aberrations. Even secular and pluralistic societies promote certain economic and relational behaviors as representative of their highest values. "Deep down, we all have an implicit recognition of the moral arc of history, despite our differences in its direction." In our case, as Christians, the truth is that in a God-breathed, God-designed universe, our alignment with God's vision is the foundation of social and personal morality and well-being. Today's readings remind us of that, and of our responsibility in living it.