

GROUNDING IN COVENANT

In the scripture passage we just heard you may recognize the gist of the Ten Commandments. The lectionary has edited out a few verses that provide a bit more detail but has maintained the essence of this powerful statement from God to the Israelites as they came into deeper relationship with the God who had led them out of bondage in Egypt. These “ten words” that were originally ten short utterances without much additional explanation have profoundly shaped Jewish and Christian faith. They’ve also been held up in the secular world as lying at the core of America civil religion – often in rather problematic ways. In my previous ministerial setting in Ashtabula County there were repeated pushes to have the Ten Commandments posted in court houses and public schools. One local church hosted an annual Ten Commandments day in which their youth were encourage to wear shirts with the Ten Commandments printed on them to school. I once wrote a pastor’s column in the local paper called “Tempest in a T-shirt” in response to that effort stating:

Before you don the Decalogue think about what you are saying through your choice of clothing. Are you really in favor of a national religion that favors some Americans at the expense of others? Is the best use you can make of the Ten Commandments to employ them as a weapon in the current culture war? Rather than participating in but one more distraction to the real mission of our public schools (i.e., education not indoctrination) why not save your T-shirt for your next Youth Group gathering. If you want your fellow students to discover the full significance of the Ten Commandments, invite them to join you for church some time.

Personally, if, as a Christian, you want to wear your heart on your sleeve blazoned across your t-shirt, why not employ the Beatitudes instead? The challenge we face with the Ten Commandments in our modern society is that we have divorced them from their original context and except for employing them in partisan cultural wars, for the most part have ignored them completely.

For starters, the Ten Commandments were originally the fundamental and elemental commands that sought to shape and order *a relationship* – a relationship between God and the Israelites. The commandments seek to shape and order the world around the radical vision of the God who brought them out of Egypt. When we divorce the Ten Commandments from their faith context they become mere rules, rather than fundamental parameters for what it meant to be particular people in relationship with a particular God. As I’ve said, at their core the Ten Commandments concern relations: first, relations to God; secondly, relations concerning one’s neighbors which in this case is implied to be other Israelites. If we are to claim these commandments as our own, it really is impossible to do so without claiming the God that goes with them. For Christians, that need not be problematic for we believe that through Jesus, this same God is already at work bringing God’s promised realm – a realm shaped by relationship into the world.

We empty the Ten Commandments of their power when we make them into merely an additional set of rules for civil society thereby placing them on equal footing with other legal codes. The Ten Commandments are far more radical. They are not merely rules but a distinct proposal for

how to shape society in ways that directly challenge the status quo. One interpreter sums them up this way:

...the Decalogue (i.e., the Ten Commandments) stands as a critical principle of protest against every kind of exploitive social relationship (public, interpersonal, capitalist and socialist) and as a social vision of possibility that every social relation (public and interpersonal, economic and political) can be transformed and made into a liberation relation.

This morning I want to just lift up a few brief examples of the radical vision of the Ten Commandments for our reflection and here I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to theologian and scriptural interpreter, Walter Brueggemann for insights. When Brueggemann turns his keen eye on the Ten Commandments he notes: “the Biblical God is not ‘user friendly;’” going onto to point out the ways both liberals and conservatives can be tempted to contain the God they worship. For liberals, the temptation is to diminish the role of God, either to remove God from the public spheres of life and leave God for interpersonal matters, or to make God an object of adoration rather than a subject who can actually do anything. He sums this critique up by noting the (incorrect to him) slogan “God has no hands but ours.” On the other side, the conservative temptation is seeing God as a settled, sovereign God who in fact is not operative as a political character but is only a set of fixed propositions that provide certitude and stability. Either way, as Brueggemann notes “in our shared theological failure of nerve, we end with a God very unlike the one...” [revealed in the giving of the Ten Commandments]

An important connection between relation to God and relation to neighbor is the fourth commandment about Sabbath. As Brueggemann notes: “God is not a workaholic” and neither should we be. “The Sabbath is a great day of equalization in which all social distinctions are overcome, and all rest alike...this also includes resting from frantic leisure, frantic consumption and frantic exercise.” What might it mean for us as a community of faith, let alone the world if we could truly embrace Sabbath rest as God intends?

Lastly, let’s talk about speaking the truth – bearing witness honestly. In the Ten Commandments, this one is about bearing false witness is tied specifically to courtroom practice. However, at its heart, it recognizes that community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported. Wow. We have some major work to do here. Constructive dialogue is not possible when we are unwilling to speak truth to one another – even when that truth undermines our arguments and reflects on our own personal and collective failings. We could have a whole sermon on why confession, forgiveness, and assurance are not just important aspects of worship, but they are essential to a just society.

All of this comes on World Communion Sunday. What strange time for this celebration of community and commonality when we isolated and scattered due to a world-wide pandemic, as well as, separated by political divisions and ideologies. Things are a mess globally and particularly within our own nation we are some of the biggest contributors to the global messiness. It doesn’t feel very “world communion” right now. Which is exactly why now more than ever we need to acknowledge that as a particular people of faith – Christians – and around the world, we are all in this together. Praying for one another, worshiping the same God, looking to engage the world in ways that conform to God’s radical vision for a more just, peaceful, and truthful society. AMEN.