

Journey of the Cross: Foolishness or Wisdom?

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Readings: Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

I.

If there is one text we think of when we say the words “Old Testament” it is the Ten Commandments. Almost all of us remember the movie version: Charlton Heston coming down off the mountain, face glowing, stone tablets in his arms. OK, probably Moses didn’t look or sound much like Charlton Heston—but it’s the image we carry. We may even remember that image better than the commandments themselves.

There are two basic versions: what we read today and another version from the book of Deuteronomy. They contain basic rules for the people of long ago. Yet while we think of them as defining right and wrong, there are some disturbing aspects, read with modern eyes. Honestly I struggle with the Ten Commandments.

Let’s talk about the commandments we all remember. These include some basic principles of law: not stealing livestock or lusting after others’ property; not committing murder, not committing adultery; not engaging in human trafficking: yes, that is in there too.

The Ten Commandments also contain some other principles not always respected even in our times. First and foremost: they demand a day off every week, not only for oneself but for one’s workers and children, spouses and even livestock.... Even God rested on the seventh day, they tell us—go and do likewise! You, and every one of the creatures that depends on you, needs a day of rest. The Deuteronomy version makes plain what remains more hidden between the lines in what we read this morning. Deuteronomy says of the principle of Sabbath rest: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

Limited as they are, those are probably the oldest labor rights laws on our books! The *men* the passage addressed when it was written—some of them—owned slaves and had absolute power of life and death over others. But the day of Sabbath was then and remains now a reminder that they were once in the same boat as those they ruled over. Don’t forget that once you were slaves yourself!

In our time, when we in this nation seem to want to keep out all outsiders, and fear all foreigners, and scorn workers’ needs and rights—the sentiment in these ancient words is one worth preserving! Remember you were once immigrants yourselves—your fathers and mothers sure were. Remember, you too once worked in mines and had to share-crop yourselves. Remember you were once slaves in Egypt too.

There is lots of powerful stuff in these commandments: for instance there is the command of not bearing false witness—which is to say not lying in order to harm one’s neighbor or save oneself! Especially it says not to use the name of God to bring about harm.... We assume “using God’s name in vain” is about cussing. But it isn’t about just any kind of bad language. It is about using the name of the Holy One in ways that hurt others and try to advance our own ends. How common it is that folk abuse the name of God, by claiming God’s will for whatever cause is nearest and dearest to our self-interest. The commandment means *not* claiming we are proceeding “with God on our side”. And then there is the reminder to honor our elders: the ancient words insist that how we treat our elders is the key to our own future and our wellbeing as a society. How are we doing on that one?

II.

I started out saying that I struggle with the Ten Commandments. That isn’t just because they are hard to keep. It is because the Commandments were clearly written for men, and men in power: they presume that the listeners have slaves; they include human slaves, wives and cattle in the same breath. There is here no bill of rights nor equal rights amendment. There is no human rights code that tells us torture is wrong. No, the Ten Commandments are essentially a few laws limiting the abuse of power by the powerful—and that’s good! But they don’t go very far. And some of the words are therefore exceedingly painful: because they presume privilege.

We do well to struggle with the Ten Commandments and acknowledge they are not the whole picture: only the memory of the beginning of Law; only the assertion of a Liberating God that there be some elemental fairness in human relationships, a justice higher than self-serving greed.

And yet let us keep on struggling! At the root of these commandments is a wisdom that can ultimately draw us far beyond these beginnings. Because the commandments are grounded in the one basic summons to ALL of God’s people: to be in a faithful loving relationship with the One who is the creator of everything, God of the living and the dead, Source of all goodness, the One who is Love itself. They are an invitation from the great I AM, who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery, and delivered them to freedom. They provide the raw material for the two *great* commandments, teachings we receive from Christ and other rabbis of ancient times: Love your God with all you have and are, all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And love your neighbor as you love yourself.

III.

I moved to New York State many years ago, and started to serve in a church in a neighborhood where chaos was common. I assumed we would be exempt in some ways, as a church. And then one day the microphones all disappeared in one fell swoop—and it became clear that even a church building wasn’t off-limits for some. Another time, our loose offering was stolen. So much for respect for God’s name. And yet again, one day someone dug up the annuals our church secretary had carefully planted around the church, presumably for their own front yard. So much for not coveting what belongs to your neighbor! I remember seeing the eyes

of Ken Setera, church secretary extraordinaire, that day. He didn't have to say a word. What I saw there was a simple question: Is nothing sacred?

You and I live in a world that hasn't exactly memorized the Ten Commandments, let alone written the love of God or neighbor on its heart. And yet here comes the zinger: Jesus Christ invites us not only to keep the rules, but to dare far more. Jesus dares us to live by the Spirit that is at their source. Christ invites us to take the next steps.

At the heart of the Law and the Gospel both is this amazing assertion: When we were nothing, God came and claimed us as God's very own. God said: "You are my beloved children." God said, "You are not slaves, you are not nobodies: you are mine and I love you." And if we take that to heart, then we find the power to start to live like children of God. We start to learn how to love ourselves. We start to see that every creature around us is also a beloved child of God! This is the Wisdom contained in the words of that old slave spiritual sung by those in shackles, that later became a civil rights anthem: "O Freedom, O Freedom over me. And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free." Someone who wrote that song knew that though her body might be in chains she was the beloved child of God, unchained in the Spirit, a person of worth in the eyes of God.

When we take to heart the Love of our Maker, and realize who we are, and WHOSE we are, we start to sense that within us there is a humanity deeper and broader and better than the old rules allow for. Our hearts of stone are transformed into hearts of flesh and blood, and our minds into imaginations of fire and love. And now we don't just live by a rulebook for people of privilege. We start to question the privilege, question the status quo of ownership and property and privilege and domination. Before we will be enslaved, we will be buried in our graves!

They say it is a dog eat dog world. They say that God helps those who help themselves. They say all kinds of things. And we believe that the things they say are generally wrong. There is a much better way to travel, a gentler and more adventurous journey worth undertaking.

When we meet Jesus, when we sense the love of the God who made each and every one of us in God's image, and takes each and every one for God's own child, then we start to take a journey, a pilgrimage, that can include both great joy and great suffering—because we are invited to live out of step with the old rules. We are invited to walk with Jesus on a journey of wonder and love, and also a journey that must sometimes include a cross. We are given the chance to start modeling a whole new way of being with each other and with all of humanity. We are invited to start living a whole new world of meaning and prayer and action. And no matter how far short we fall, the love is there, the promise of the One who says there will be love for a thousand generations.

Let me put it this way: the Ten Commandments include many Thou shalt not's. These limit the abuse of power. But the God of Love invites us to live creatively and dangerously, to walk and talk and live together in a way based in a new kind of spirit-power. Our new relationship with God points us toward a new kind of relationship with other human beings and with creation, a relationship based in freedom and hope. It insists not on duty but on love; not on rules but on justice; not on obligation but on freedom.

One recent example of living this new way came out of a conversation not long ago by members of this church, talking to neighbors at a community brunch on the last Saturday of the month. A couple of our guests were surprised by the warmth and caring and politeness with which they were received. And your volunteers were surprised – and pleased-- by their surprise! Why would we do otherwise? Well, don't take this for granted! And don't let it slip between our fingers! The event reminded me of the words of Thomas Cornell, a soup kitchen cook and Catholic Worker, who while stirring a pot of delicious smelling stew to serve to hungry people, said to me words to this effect: "We believe that Christ can come to us disguised as any one of those who pass through these doors. Why would we give Christ anything but our best?" As he looked me in the eye I could see he was someone who had indeed met Christ. Not once, but again and again. When Love becomes our law, the dangerous truth is, you and I will also meet Christ, again and again. Foolish way to live? You tell me.