

P19A 2023 Exodus 20: 1-20 & Matthew 21:33-46

This week I was preparing both this sermon and the Adult Day workshop for Sequanota, so when the 10 Commandments came up as the first reading, I immediately thought of the camp seal, which pictures them as two numbered tablets: three commandments on the first that govern our relationship with God, and seven on the second that govern our relationships with each other. Unfortunately, the artist who made the screen print for my very first camp shirt got creative or possibly distracted and produced this rare collector's item, where each tablet on the seal clearly features four commandments, totaling only eight, not ten. I call this the "You Pick Two" version, like the meal deal at Panera where you can order soup and a sandwich, soup and a salad, or a salad and a sandwich, but not all three. I'm sure we can have all three Panera options at the heavenly banquet table, but we don't get to pick two of the ten commandments that we don't have to follow.

This season we've been reading over Genesis and Exodus, following the story of Israel becoming a nation, going to Egypt, and being freed from slavery; they've got about 40 years of wandering ahead of them to finish what would normally be about a two week hike. But when they finally settle in the Promised Land, they're going to need some instructions for how to live together in community. They had been slaves, without the authority or experience to govern themselves; they don't have a system of law or moral code. God intends for them to be a model nation for the world, an innovative society without a pharaoh or king, with no ruling class to exploit them. Israel will eventually demand a king for themselves, but the plan is for God alone to be their king and for them to govern themselves according to this Law given to them through Moses.

These are just the first of the 613 commandments in the Torah, as many as there are seeds in a pomegranate, according to tradition; and even what we think of as the 10 Commandments is really 14 separate commands as they would be counted by a rabbi. The other more specific laws, requiring good and forbidding harm, fit under the broader umbrella of what we read this morning. In general, these commandments provide good moral guidance for a peaceful, civilized society. But before we claim the 10 Commandments as universal law and try posting them in public spaces, remember that aside from the Constitutional problems, even those of us for whom this is holy scripture can't all agree on how to split up the list. Judaism numbers them one way, Roman Catholics and Lutherans number them another way; and most of the rest of the Protestant church numbers them a third way. One Lutheran church I attended had a very fancy framed print of the 10 Commandments where the numbers conflicted with the numbering in Luther's Small Catechism.

It's unfortunate that we study the 10 Commandments most during catechism, when we're teenagers, a stage in life when it is entirely developmentally appropriate to rebel against any rules, because it predisposes us to see this list as a burden. Do these things, which sometimes seem really hard to do; don't do these things, which you're sometimes really going to want to do... We're probably not plotting murder right at the moment, but Luther explained that *do not murder* also means help and support our neighbors, and *do not bear false witness* also means speak well of our neighbors and

interpret everything they do in the best possible light. These commandments become a lot harder than they look, and the Law becomes a mirror that shows us our imperfections, a list of the failures that keep us far from where God wants us to be.

But the commands God gave were intended not as a burden but as a gift: an invitation into a new and better life, into loving, healthy relationship with God and one another. And each of these commands contains a promise; imagine what it meant for a former slave to be given the gift of sabbath—a day of no labor. God was leading the people into a land so abundant that there would be no need to steal, no cause for one neighbor to covet what another had, because everyone would have enough.

Ancient Israel did not, in fact, put all of these commandments into perfect practice. Even when God sent judges and prophets to call the people back into the society envisioned here, they raged against the prophets instead of changing their ways. The people forgot who they were—the freed people of Israel, and whose they were—God's own people, and what they were supposed to be doing—living as God called them to live: a life that was better than what they had known or what they would have invented for themselves, a life that was a beacon of hope to others. We also lose sight of the life God envisions for us—forgetting who we are and whose we are and what we are called to do; only we're worse, because we forget even when we have Israel's story to help us remember.

Jesus' parable narrates that same spiritual amnesia. The tenants forget they are not owners, that the vineyard isn't theirs to do with whatever they want. They ignore the landowner's messengers and somehow think that if they kill his son they'll get the inheritance instead of being held responsible for their actions. This parable doesn't make a very good allegory for end-times judgment; Jesus' audience assumes that the landowner will deal with the evil tenants then give others a chance to manage the vineyard; so it's not a metaphor for the end of the world because there's still a vineyard to manage. This parable is about the kingdom of God here on earth, and Jesus tells us that the kingdom is realized among us when we live the way God calls us to live. Idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, lies aren't going to produce good fruit in the vineyard. We can't ignore all the commandments that God gave us and expect this life to look like the kind of kingdom that would belong to our good and loving God.

Neither in Moses' day nor in Jesus' day were the commandments understood as a checklist to determine where people would spend eternity. These always were, and still are, the ways we are called to behave in community, remembering that every other person we meet is made in the image of God, just like we are. This is how we are called to behave, remembering that *I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me*, also means we don't put ourselves before God, as if we've figured out a way of life that is superior to the life commanded by the Creator of the Universe. Are we going to be very good at keeping God's commandments? Probably not. Scripture is the story of people not being very good at doing what God commanded. But scripture is first and foremost the story of God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—even when we sin. Thanks be to God who calls us into a life that is good—good for us, good for our neighbors, good for our world—and who meets us with mercy when we do otherwise.