

Reviving, Making Wise, Rejoicing and Enlightening

A sermon on the ten commandments (with Psalm 19)

Oct. 2, 2011

The psalmist praises the law of God:

*The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul;*

*The decrees of God are sure, making wise the simple.*

*The precepts of God are right, rejoicing the heart;*

*The commandment of God is clear, enlightening the eyes.*

There was a time when the Ten Commandments played a more constructive role in our life together than today. Reformed churches had a worship habit of reciting the Decalogue every Lord's Day at the beginning of the service. Catechisms were organized around three things: the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. All Sunday School children memorized the Ten Commandments before the sixth grade. These were the three pillars of faith, according to many of our ancestors. Today, more than half of all Americans say the Bible is the Word of God and the basis for law and the moral life, and yet only a fraction of those polled could name as many as four of the Ten Commandments. .400 is a good batting average in baseball, but in religion, it falls short of the basic skills required of every rookie.

The Ten Commandments often make news, as when Dominionists talk about how our nation is divinely ordained to be a "light to the nations" and "under God." Or there are the court houses and public squares where well meaning moralists want to enshrine the Law of Moses as the Law of the Land –in marble and bronze. A cartoon shows Moses on Mount Sinai, where there is a large pile of stone tablets, clearly more than what Moses can carry down the mountain to the people of Israel. "Have you considered a top ten list?" Moses asks.

Martin Luther marveled at the Law of God. Not in its excessive demands, but in its brevity. Luther says, think of all that the Lord God could have demanded of us. Look at how lovingly God minimized expectations for us so that we might avoid disaster. God addresses us with baby talk: "You no kill. No steal. Don't lie." One does not need a Ph.D. to get some idea of what is being communicated in these ten words of God. The beauty is that God gives us guidance for life, some boundaries to being a decent neighbor and living in a way that is not self-destructive. One of the great lines of our UCC Statement of Faith is that God "seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin." The Ten Commandments are one of the ways that God seeks to save all people. Israel's name for the law of Moses was Torah, which means something like "the way" or "the finger pointing the way."

Torah was not given to ruin people's fun. God gave the Law to keep the wandering former slaves from aimlessly wandering forever in the wilderness. In a sermon on the Ten Commandments, Barbara Brown Taylor says, "God's covenant with their grandfather Abraham had three shining jewels [of promise] in it: descendants as plentiful as the stars in the sky, a special relationship to God, and a land of milk and honey all their own." But "something was still missing," she writes, "something Moses went up the mountain to get" (*Gospel Medicine*).

Taylor reflects on the relationship between the law and the promise, and about how much we might think we like the promise better than the law, and how much we appreciate just being loved, unconditionally. She then uses the metaphor of a tent (a good metaphor for people in the wilderness!) to explain how it all works together, because "promise without law is like a tent without tent poles." The law would shape the life and identity of the people of God, and be a force that would preserve it against every threat. Taylor imagines God giving the gift of the law and saying: "Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness....Guard your life together. Guard your life with me" (*Gospel Medicine*).

The law gave the promises a foundation, a structure, some shape and stability. There is nothing more useless and frustrating than a tent without poles, without a frame, without a way to keep it up and transform it from being a big sack to a dwelling to protect you from the sun, wind, rain and snow.

You might be sitting there this morning thinking that this sermon is different from most heard in this place. You would be right. Preaching and faith often divide along a

line with Gospel Grace on one side and Law on the other. If a preacher thinks the basic problem of our time is too much rigidity, too much self-righteous pride, too much law, then that preacher will dish out a lot of Gospel Grace. If a preacher thinks there is too much “cheap grace” out there, with aimless, floundering people, then that preacher will dish out the Law. Being a child of the sixties, it should come as no surprise that I fall on the Gospel Grace side most of the time. The Law sometimes rubs my antiestablishmentarianism the wrong way. I once wore a button that said “Question Authority.” I never wore a button that said, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” But that is the beauty of the lectionary. This prescribed reading of Exodus 20 is the church’s way of bringing some balance to the hobby horse, Johnny one note style of some of us preachers[A1].

The fact is that our faith is a balance of Law and Gospel. One of the functions of the law is to keep us on the path. Another function of the law is to drive us to the arms of the gospel because we learn that we cannot keep the law, no matter how hard we try. This is where grace comes in.

There is a prayer in the Jewish prayer book which says, “God freed us from slavery to Pharaoh so that we might be slaves to God alone.” The law points the way to God, and keeps us from hurting ourselves and one another. The Ten Commandments begin with the simple statement that Yahweh is the God who liberated the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and thus God’s people are have no other gods before Yahweh. It does not say there are no other gods. As I often say to you, the problem of our time is not disbelief, agnosticism or atheism. The problem is misbelief. It is not that we don’t believe but that we believe in the wrong things. The first of the ten words of the Decalogue, the first word of guidance of Torah, is to set straight who God is. We need this boundary-giving as much as the freed slaves who wandered in aimlessness in the wilderness for forty years before coming to the promised land.

Will Willimon tells the story of a conversation he had with a prison chaplain, a man who had been in ministry in the state penitentiary for many years. Willimon said something about prison being a place where people end up who are abused, who suffer from low self esteem, or something liberal like that. The chaplain corrected him.

“Not true,” he said. “ Most people here are not in jail because they think too little of themselves, but because they think too much of themselves. They are brilliant. Everyone else who has a job or follows the law is a chump. Most [prisoners] get here because of the arrogant idea that the rules are made for everyone but them.”

G.K. Chesterton said that “If a man walking, comes to the edge of a cliff and keeps walking, he will not break the law of gravity. He will prove it.” There is plenty of evidence in our time that our business and political leaders have proven the continuing validity of the Ten Commandments. Hedge fund managers, CEOs making millions while laying off workers, Wall Street operatives and their congressional overseers have thought that they are too smart for conventional accounting practices, that the rules are made for less creative dummies, and this arrogance has wrecked our economy. The sin of pride, hubris is the Greek word, is not a law that we have broken so much in recent years as we have proven it. Smart people, not dummies, ran the Roman Empire and the Third Reich in Germany, and look what they got.

In some ways, the first commandment sums up the whole thing: we need to remember who is God. It is not you, not me, not the smartest person in the room, or in the nation or in the world. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the God who demands our joyful obedience. If we follow rule one, then idol-making, blasphemy, murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness and coveting will not occur to us, and if we follow rule one, Sabbath-keeping and parent-honoring will come naturally.

Jesus was asked about the commandments and which were most important. You remember his answer: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the heart of the law; and it is the Gospel, too.

The psalmist had it right: the law revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes. The rules are given to keep us safe. To keep us close to God and one another. To keep us from hurting ourselves and one another. They are there for a reason: to be lived in joyful obedience, to free us from all death-dealing enslavements, to give us abundant life.

God says to, "Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness....Guard your life together. Guard your life with me."