

Sermon

October 4, 2020

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Back in the days of Black and White Television, Rod Serling had a number of shows: The Outer Limits, The Twilight Zone, which asked you for 20 minutes plus the time of commercials, to give up control of your television screen, to suspend the reality of what you think you know.

A few weeks ago when Diane preached about the Vineyard, we named that Judaism had a beloved ancient poem quoted in Isaiah 5 that describes God planting a Vineyard but that Vineyard goes wild, so when Jesus quotes this parable today, we along with Jesus' listeners at the time, all know what this means. This morning we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion and having received Communion every month if we grew up Protestant, every week if we grew up Catholic, we know what Communion is about. The 10 Commandments have not changed in **3400 years**. Wow, that is something to ponder... During the last 3400 years civilizations rose and have fallen; languages and cultures have changed. We entered the grand experiment of the Enlightenment, Science, Medicine, Technology have changed everything about our world. Perpetual change is one of the marks of the human experience, yet these 10 Commandments have not been added to or deleted. Jesus attempted to give The 11th Commandment, in the Gospel of John as he washed their feet, commanding "YOU SHALL SERVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE SERVED YOU" but people have not listened. One of our staff reminded me last Sunday, about the Mel Brooks film "The History of the World: Part 2" where Moses is depicted as coming down the mountain with 3 Tablets of the 15 Commandments, but drops one. No, the 10 Commandments have been unchanged for 3400 years, but this day I invite us to reconsider why we have the 10 Commandments.

God's own introduction provides context "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Except many modern translations dropped everything after the first clause "I am the Lord your God" PERIOD. And with that assumption of what God has done for Israel, we lose the personal narrative context. The God of the 10 Commandments is not an abstract or theoretical idea. If we asked people "What do you think God is like?" They might say, "Good, Nice, Has a white beard, Really old" which describes several of the men in Green Valley. Some might say The Creator, or Judge, or Law Giver. But here, by God's own introduction, the first word is "I am the Lord YOUR God who rescued and redeemed you" there is personal relationship, God saved our lives. God cares about us and risks fighting for us. This first Law identifies a Pygmalion relationship: that once the Creator completed Creation, the author recognized we needed more and entered into Creation to save us and respond to us.

The 10 Commandments are not about LAW, as in our Courts stating "If you take a life you will be punished" "If you steal, or commit perjury, or abuse another, you will be held accountable," NO. The 10 Commandments establish the NORMS of all Relationships. In the mid-1960s Bruce Tuckman developed a framework for how he perceived all groups develop. Tuckman was a Psychology Professor at Ohio State University. Tuckman's Framework was that all groups begin by: "Forming, Storming, Norming the body." As Slaves in Egypt gathered for a Passover Meal, with Sacrificial Lamb, Unleavened Bread, Wine and Prayers to God, the group was FORMED. Through the repetition of the 10 Plagues with challenge to

Pharaoh "Let My People Go" finally as all of the 1st born of Egypt died, and these Slaves were chased by Pharaoh to the shore of the Red Sea when suddenly the waters opened up for them but crushed Pharaoh and his Chariots, this people went through a Cathartic STORM. In the Wilderness, the people turned to Moses demanding he be their new Pharaoh, and he said "No, but God has given us these COMMANDMENTS" this was NORMING, before they ever entered the Land, or became a Great Nation. To risk being blunt, Valley Presbyterian Church was formed in the years of Pastors Joe Hawkins and John Ross and Larry. I have heard several describe that structurally, many of the walls inside this building were exterior load-bearing walls that then became like skeletal structure as the Church expanded outside. Valley Presbyterian came through a STORM, as your Pastor I would even venture that that Storm continued through this current Pandemic. But while continuing the Patio Sale and Bible Study, Exercise Classes and celebration of Communion, part of what we have been doing together in this time, or better yet, What God has been doing is ESTABLISHING NEW NORMS for our relationships for the next 40 years.

For 3,400 years, the 10 Commandments have tried to provide us "a common foundation" as One Great Congregation, that we are all in relationship to GOD, the one, true God who rescued and redeemed us. John Calvin identified three uses for God's Law: 1) It convicts us of sin by naming what we failed to do. 2) God's law is a good guide for Civil Laws that structure orderly living. But Calvin thought that the most important was 3) that the Commandments teach us how to faithfully respond to God's Grace.

You know, it just occurs to me, that for most of my own life, I have perceived the 10 Commandments as an individual and personal requirements. These were Commandments for each individual person to follow. But if these were given to the whole people in the wilderness as "One Great Congregation" then the 10 Commandments are intended for our relationship together as that Congregation and in relation to God. One of the things that I hope and pray we bring with us as a NORM from out of this STORM, both the last 7 years and the last 7 months is our need for one another and for God.

Both because Civil Laws were based on the 10 Commandments, and because of the number of legalistic religious requirements in the Book of Leviticus, people have focused upon the Negative Commands, to: Not Lie, Not Steal, Not Murder, Not Commit Adultery, Not Covet. But the intent of the 10 Commandments is that we would establish a foundational relationship in loving God who loves us. Respecting God alone and not making other stuff the same priority as God. Honoring God's Name. Honoring the Sabbath. These were never intended as RESTRICTIVE LAWS, like Blue Laws had been; but have been like an Instruction Manual for us to better perceive and operate with balance to life, the Order of Creation. I sometimes wonder, if the 10 Commandments had only been the First and the Last:

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT OF EGYPT, OUT OF THE HOUSE OF SLAVERY;

YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR'S SPOUSE or POSSESSIONS

without the Commandments regarding Murder, Stealing, Lying, Adultery, who we would have become? What would we now stand for? Would we have remembered the 10 Commandments at all? I may be foolish, but I believe we might actually have become more than we are, because the Commandments which became Civil Laws are a lowest common denominator of what we agree to not do to others.

Jesus is remembered by Matthew as telling this Parable. That Jesus told this Parable, I truly believe, but I have to believe this was also setting up the circumstance of his life. Jesus has been arguing with the Pharisees, Chief Priests, Scribes and Saducees. He knows he is about to be arrested and crucified. BUT instead of the punishment the leaders know will be deserved, God forgives. God Cares. God weeps at the death of God's son, and God forgives.