

“For God So Loved...”

March 11th, 2018
4th Sunday in Lent
Exodus 20:1-17
John 3:14-21

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16

Let us pray... O God,
We celebrate your empowering love when we are loving and when we are loved.
We celebrate your undefeated love even when we are less than loving.
Help us to recognize what grace you are inviting us to ask for...

Amen

Much has been said about the ‘rule of law’ and ‘common sense laws’
and laments about the way things used to be –
and that we need to get back to some kind of civility.

I am inclined to think that means some agreement about
what a ‘new normal’ should look like.

The old ‘normal’ included at least a nominal acknowledgement
of the Ten Commandments as a standard for civilized behavior –
even if people could not quite name them all.

Let’s see if we have them down...

Let’s say them as ten “Thou shalt nots”...

Thou shalt not *have* any other gods besides God.

Thou shalt not *worship* any created thing.

Thou shalt not *misrepresent* God’s name.

Thou shalt not *disregard* the Sabbath day.

Thou shalt not *dishonor* your parents.

Thou shalt not *murder*.

Thou shalt not commit *adultery*.

Thou shalt not *steal*.

Thou shalt not *lie* under oath

Thou shalt not *desire* to steal anything
that belongs to your neighbor.

In recent years, fundamentalist Christians have sought to enshrine
the Ten Commandments in the form of a monument in public spaces.

By the way, there actually is such a monument on the property
of St Timothy Roman Catholic Church in Spanish Springs.

You would think the Sermon on The Mount would be preferred
as a model for what represents Christian morality, rather than
the Ten Commandments which come from the Hebrew Scriptures.

I believe the motivation for this effort is part of a broader concern
that Christians are being challenged for expressing their faith in public.
Basically, I agree and object, but not quite in the same way.

Willard, p.2

Some examples of this are

prohibitions against praying in schools or at sporting events,
or against setting up Nativity scenes in community parks,
or being discouraged from saying, 'Merry Christmas!' to strangers.

Ironically, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount counsels against
making elaborate prayers in public,

and that prayer and other ways of practicing one's faith,
are best done in private or anonymously.

Again with reference to the Sermon on the Mount,

this is because God is a living and omniscient being,
who already sees and knows what we do and even think.

Quite frankly, I agree that there is a stifling of religious expression,

but I can understand concerns about one religion being imposed upon others.

Unfortunately, that is part of our history from the Congregationalist side of the UCC
when the Puritans colonized the New England states

and imposed strict Sabbath laws and persecuted Quakers and Catholics,
as well as made war on Native Americans.

The remedy – in my opinion, is to permit all religions to have the opportunity
to be expressed in the public square so long as they comply with laws
that protect people from coercion.

It's right there in the First Amendment...

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;
or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press;
or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,
and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

<http://constitution.findlaw.com/amendment1.html>

Unfortunately, our First Amendment right of freedom of speech

has been interpreted to favor commercial marketing, 'junk science',
and actual 'fake news' – though more & more, I believe that will change.

Anxiety over expressing Christian culture would go away as our society
recognizes and appreciates that which is true and good and compassionate
in other faith traditions.

I do believe some discernment is required,

because the central role of love is not true about all religions –
so, not all religions are true.

The litmus test of rational loving-kindness is needed to recognize cults of coercion,
but again this would be best remedied by an "even playing field"
of equal opportunity in the "marketplace of ideas" of the public square.

Willard, p.3

Getting back to the Ten Commandments, some critics would say that progressive Christians just consider these to be “The Ten Suggestions”. That is true for some, but again – what significance should the Ten Commandments have for progressive Christians?

My inclination is that the Ten Commandments are more like the Law of Gravity; If you violate any of them, you are going to have trouble in life – you’re going to have a fall.

So, they are still significant, but the Apostle Paul sees the Hebrew Law – including the Ten Commandments, as playing into that aspect of our psychology that is always looking to violate the Law.

In the Book of Romans chapter 7-8, Paul examines this specifically as he distinguishes between the Hebrew Law and the Spirit of Christ, when he wrote:

“While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

“But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

If we substitute the word, “Love” for “Spirit”, then we can see that Paul is talking about Christians living under the Law of Love – and by logical extension, forgiveness.

Let me also say that life under the Law – including the “Ten Thou Shalt Nots” and any set of external laws, plays into a mindset that is always looking for those who violate the Law.

Looking for violations can be as much a sin as a violation itself, because it invites a self-righteous attitude prone to prejudice and the ‘single victim mechanism’ of scapegoating.

The Apostle Paul also spoke of grace in Ephesians 2:8-9...

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any [one] should boast.

That grace has as its foundation an understanding of the Ten Don’ts of the Ten Commandments, as really being Two Do’s:

“Thou shalt love God and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

The love we are to show to God and to one another, however, is modeled by God’s love for us.

We find that sentiment in today’s Gospel message with that familiar and famous verse, John 3:16...

For God so loved the world that [God] gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Willard, p. 4

The Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson – who served the United Church of Christ as the Executive Minister for Justice & Witness Ministries and is currently the pastor for 1st Tampa UCC, said to this effect, ‘For God so loved the world [period]’.

The rest of our Gospel message this morning speaks about how that it is only through Christ that the world can be saved – but then this is spoken in terms of ‘light’ and ‘life’ which are universal images.

If we emphasize the ‘love’ part of the message, then we can see how there is a universal message – but also a specific one, too.

If you ‘believe’ in Christ – then that implies you are about the universal human goals of ‘light’ and ‘life’ and ‘love’.

It means you are simultaneously under the “Two Commandment Version” of the Ten Commandments – to love God and to love your neighbor, but also that you believe in and value those universal truths of ‘light’ and ‘life’ and ‘love’ – wisdom & creativity, joy & pain, devotion & achievement.

The Law of Love is not some loosey-goosey, pie-in-the sky, by & by concept, but the practical application of a law that is actually fun to follow.

There are certainly risks and penalties even ‘Karmic disasters’ – to borrow a phrase from the Hindus, when we fail to do the loving thing. But basically, the Law of Love asks us as Christians to do... what we love, and that means to be who you are in the process – be ‘born again’, if you will, and we are to help others do the same, that they may truly be free to be themselves, to live authentically, as well.

The limits of the Law of Love are in the form of ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’.

When you think about it, this is really the basis for all just laws.

All just laws and regulations, constitutions and by-laws – and their amendments, seek the welfare of everyone, which means they are based on rational loving-kindness, or simply, ‘love’.

All unjust laws that do not take into consideration the welfare of everyone, and therefore, are unloving, are justifiably challenged and defied.

You might well ask, “What’s so hard about following the Law of Love?”

Well, you’re right, but the news is full of tragedies about people who can’t seem to figure that out.

Willard, p.5

Nevertheless, we are seeing an “emerging love ethic” that ‘God is still speaking’ as a cry of love for the sake of humanity, all creatures, and the world itself. We are seeing and hearing how this Law of Love is asserting itself through the Black Lives Matter/Blue Lives Matter movements, the movements in support of the Women’s March, MeToo, the Water Protectors, DACA, all persecuted immigrants – especially Muslims, and now the March for Our Lives representing the voices of Newtown, Pulse, and Parkland.

We are seeing and hearing the cry for justice & peace with the expectation that this society is based on the ‘rule of law’, and we must work to ensure those laws are about ‘common sense’; and therefore, in accordance with the great law of rational loving-kindness – that it makes sense to be kind.

I will close with another well known and popular text from the Bible that also happens to be from the Apostle Paul – the ‘Love Chapter’ of 1st Corinthians 13...

¹ If I speak in the tongues of [human beings] and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; ⁵ it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

⁹ For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became [an adult], I gave up childish ways.

¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but [someday] face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

¹³ So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Amen

Our lesson today comes from

*Exodus 20:1-17 as found in the Common English Version,
and includes the 10 Commandments*

¹ Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery.

³ You must have no other gods before me.

⁴ Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—
of anything in the sky above or on the earth below
or in the waters under the earth.

⁵ Do not bow down to them or worship them,
because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God.
I punish children for their parents' sins
even to the third and fourth generations
of those who hate me.

⁶ But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation
of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance;
the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy.

⁹ Six days you may work and do all your tasks,
¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.
Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters,
your male or female servants, your animals,
or the immigrant who is living with you.

¹¹ Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea,
and everything that is in them in six days,
but rested on the seventh day.

That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² Honor your father and your mother
so that your life will be long on the fertile land
that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ Do not kill.

¹⁴ Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵ Do not steal.

¹⁶ Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

¹⁷ Do not desire your neighbor's house.

Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife,
male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else
that belongs to your neighbor.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 3:1-21

- ¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicode'mus, a ruler of the [Judeans].
- ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."
- ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, [they] cannot see the kingdom of God."
- ⁴ Nicode'mus said to him, "How can [someone] be born when [they are] old? Can [they] enter a second time into [their] mother's womb and be born?"
- ⁵ Jesus answered, "[Oy!] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, [they] cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'
- ⁸ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."
- ⁹ Nicode'mus said to him, "How can this be?"
- ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?
- ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony.
- ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?
- ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven but [the one] who descended from heaven, the Son of man [the true Heir of Humanity].
- ¹⁴ "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up,
- ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."
- [The text continues, but not as a quote by Jesus...]
- ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- ¹⁷ For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

- ¹⁸ [The one] who believes in him is not condemned;
[the one] who does not believe is condemned already,
because [they have] not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
- ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world,
and [people] loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.
- ²⁰ For every one who does evil hates the light,
and does not come to the light, lest [their] deeds should be exposed.
- ²¹ But [the one] who does what is true comes to the light,
that it may be clearly seen that [their] deeds have been [accomplished] in God.