

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Ten Commandments and One House of God

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2: 13-22

The Ten Commandments? Preach on the Ten Commandments? That's like a history professor teaching the first 20 centuries of civilization in a thirty-minute lecture. Even Hollywood had trouble with the Ten Commandments no matter how commanding Charleston Heston was as Moses.

Since preachers go where fools fear to tread, I will attempt to climb Mount Sinai with Moses and return with the Ten Commandments. I will do so by way of a collage of others who have dealt with the Ten Commandments. Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski made a ten-part series called "The Decalogue." He said, "For 6,000 years these rules have been unquestionably right but we break them every day. We know what we should do, and yet we fail to live as we should. People know something is wrong in life. There is some kind of atmosphere that makes people turn now to other values. The Ten Commandments are the basic questions of life, and that is probably the real reason for wanting to tell these stories." In each of the one-hour segments there is a young man, silent and solemn. We don't know who he is. Perhaps an angel or Jesus. Perhaps he represents the profound sadness, the tragedy, and folly we humans commit against others and ourselves. Kieslowski only says, "He's not very pleased with us." Chris Hedges says, "He freed the commandments from the clutter of piety."

Elton Trueblood, after the horrors of World War I, composed a book on the Ten Commandments called Foundations for Reconstruction. Trueblood, the Quaker saint, believed the 10 commandments possessed a foundational power to reset the direction of a nation in the direction of righteousness. The book was published in 1923.

Do you remember Alfred E. Neuman and Mad Magazine? My mother wouldn't let me read it because she said it was of the devil. Surprise, surprise but Mad Magazine dished out large portions of the Ten Commandments in satirizing the Moral Majority. Vernard Eller wrote The Mad Morality: Or the Ten Commandments Revisited in 1970 and it alerts us to Mad Magazine's devotion to the Ten Commandments. The book is still available on Amazon.

In 1987, television news journalist, Ted Koppel, gave the commencement address at Duke University, "The Ten Commandments and Vanna White." Sounding more like Amos than an evening news anchor, Koppel warned the graduates that television was a powerful media with the power to shape people in ways that were not all honest, righteous, or just. Koppel said, in what now sounds prophetic: "Whatever your merchandise, if you want to move it in bulk, you flaunt it on television. Merchants trying to sell their goods, politicians trying to sell their ideas, preachers trying to sell their gospel, or their morality: all of these items are efficiently sold on TV. If that doesn't scare the living daylights out of you, you're not paying attention. Never mind the dry goods; television, toilet paper, [televangelists and politicians] were made for one another."

The Ten Commandments, like the sky, cover everything. People with a minor league

Sunday school education will face a moral crisis and from somewhere a little voice: "Thou shalt not." If you were raised Catholic or Baptist good luck hiding from the "Thou shalt not." They sound like clods of dirt falling on a casket. They sound like the clink of the key that locks us in a prison forever. My childhood education insisted that the Ten Commandments were designed to make sure you never did anything interesting or went anywhere that looked intriguing. My commandment loving teachers added, multiplied, and gave birth to dozens and dozens of new commandments. Too many people think the Ten Commandments are prohibition of everything that is fun. Only a Gnostic could love this version.

In 2005, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and Presbyterian minister who grew up southwest of Albany, Lee Hedges wrote, *Losing Moses on the Freeway.* He wrote the book for people like himself who have struggled on a deep and visceral way with one of the commandments. He says, "The commandments guide us toward relationships built on trust rather than fear." The commandments protect us from the insanity of violence as a way of national salvation. When a nation tosses the commandments aside, sanctity and respect for human life are ignored, people are treated as "less than," and there will be a "heady intoxication with violence, power, and death." This is not the first time our nation has flirted with dispensing with the commandments, with the rule of law, but this time is more dangerous because this time there is a zealous religious tribe providing cover for the violent ones by pretending to honor the Ten Commandments as a symbol, but please, I'm begging you, don't miss that this endangers church and democracy.

I mention this because during the current manifestation of evangelicalism in the USA, there's been a movement that makes the Ten Commandments more of a "golden calf". A bevy of evangelical spokespersons have been on a campaign to rewrite the history of America as a nation founded as a Christian nation and founded on the 10 commandments. This should be upsetting to conservatives who still believe in the separation of church and state. When it comes to the Ten Commandments the undisputable champion of chicanery and idolatry is Judge Roy Moore of Alabama. I am deeply offended that a professing Christian would take something as deeply important as the Ten Commandments and make a political idol of them. Roy Moore was the Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. Historian Randall Balmer, writing about Moore, says, "I know Roy Moore. He's always been a con artist. [He] has made a career of willfully misrepresenting the ideas he claims to stand for." Moore was so enamored with the idea of the 10 Commandments, as a symbol, that he had a washing-machine-size rock of granite carved into a replica of the Ten Commandments. The monstrosity was a 5,280-pound millstone. That's 528 pounds per commandments. I have a first cousin, a national weight-lifting champion, who can bench press 660 pounds. He could easily pick up a 528-pound commandment, but for most of us this would be impossible. Notice the subtle way of idolatry. The Ten Commandments, in the media, became known as "Roy's Rocks." All the real rocks must have been in Roy's head. There's something embarrassing about an evangelical making such a fuss over a symbol, a metaphor. It is unbecoming of literalists.

Judge Moore makes the commandments a burden, exactly what they are not supposed to be. See him hauling around tons of dreary obligation. Religion is always populated by people who preach obligation, obligation. No wonder Jesus says in Matthew 23, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they

themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" If someone has conned you into believing that faith is an obligation, a list of 14 impossible things you must believe before breakfast, or a list of social issues you must embrace, you need to throw down that load. Throw it down. You need to imagine that you are a pioneer family being chased across the prairie, and your Conestoga (Conna-stoga) wagon is full of family heirlooms, but you have to throw 'em all out in order to be safe. You have to lighten the load. Religion was never meant to wear you out, wear you down, or be a burden. A woman once said to me, "I'm sorry I don't have enough energy to be a member of your baptist church." Again, Jesus offers a word: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." That's what I'm attempting here: lifting some burdens, reducing some weariness, getting you some rest by learning at the feet of Jesus.

Trivialization is a good word for what has happened to the "Ten Commandments." And we now have the Ten Commandments for almost everything. California Republican Party Chairman Gaylord Parkinson came up with an 11th commandment for Republicans. In his 1990 autobiography *An American Life*, Reagan attributed the rule to Parkinson, explained its origin, and claimed to have followed it: "The personal attacks against me during the primary finally became so heavy that the state Republican chairman, Gaylord Parkinson, postulated what he called the Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican. It's a rule I followed during that campaign and have ever since." It's hardly worth mentioning how broken that commandment is now. When Donald Trump was allegedly paying hush money to a porn star, First Baptist Dallas pastor, Robert Jeffries, invented a new commandment: "Evangelicals still believe in the commandment, 'Thou shalt not have sex with a porn star. However, whether this president has violated that commandment is totally irrelevant to our support of him." I don't care about Trump or porn stars here. It's the Baptist preacher saying that he doesn't care about the Ten Commandments and attempting to invent a new commandment to rationalize his own brand of politics.

Enough of this nonsense! The Decalogue means freedom, liberation. It's not the freedom to do as you please, to huff and puff and say things like, "Who are these scientists who think they can tell me I have to wear a mask?" I'm talking freedom from death, violence, hatred, bad relationships. I'm talking freedom from fear and prejudice and the freedom to be with the poor and to be with our neighbors in love. We are free to rest; we are free to live honorably and peacefully with our families; we are free to be a people that does not exploit or murder or steal. We are free to become one another's friends, and the friends of God. Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last!

And of course, the prophets are all over the Ten Commandments. Their words reek of the Ten words. They are overlaid in scene after scene of Scripture. Far from ten words carved in stone, these commandments serve to expand ethical consciousness in each new generation. God has always had them there as our North Star guiding us in the path to greatness. They are always there when God's people get sidetracked. These are old words, capable of new meanings. This certainly makes a problem for those who want to stick up for original constructionism.

The Ten Words keep expanding in meaning in the prophetic imagination. The words to not steal are, a few verses later, expanded to prohibit the kidnapping of people. Later on the words about Sabbath expand to extend beyond Sabbath to include sabbaticals for the land and a Jubilee. Strict constructionists will need a pill at this point. Sabbath, in God's economy, becomes a Jubilee. Every 50th year all property is to be returned to original owners and all debts forgiven. We are not a Jubilee people. You can't imagine giving this land back to the Mohawks can you? People are expected to pay their debts, earn their way, even if they are victims of a violent economics that creates a few winners and millions on the bottom rung of the ladder. People are expected to pull themselves up by their boot straps when they have no boots, climb the ladder of success when there's no ladder in their community. The Ten Commandments are meant to help us care for the people who have no boots, no ladders to climb, and no golden goose or golden spoon in the mouth.

This is a clarion call for us to be the Ten Commandments in a distorted culture. What an enormous call God has given us: to work as the alternative to a social system gone mad. We are to show and tell the world how free people live in relationship with God and one another.

God is calling to us to be the public display of the Ten Words. When we live by these words, we expose the false ways of the world organized around wealth, power, and status. The wisdom of this world does not teach us how to live. The power of this world does not guarantee our security. The wealth of this world does not ease our anxiety or make us happy. Only God's liberating words, the ten words, can do all that. It sounds like a good start on the road to greatness.