

## PRIORITIES

TEXT: Exodus 20:1-21

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 27, 2022*

The word “gospel” means “good news.” As a minister of the gospel, my most basic charge is to stand up here every week and try to help all of us, including me, to see the ways that God is at work for the salvation of the world; even, and maybe especially, when it seems patently obvious that we’re all going straight to hell in a handbasket. How does the Friday of Jesus’ crucifixion ever pass itself off as “Good” Friday? Is that truth or farce? Sometimes it can be hard to tell.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl points out that a key to surviving even the most horrific times is finding meaning, a purpose of some sort that continues to give our actions value. If there’s any good news in being alive in these times, it’s that we live in an age when even our smallest actions have meaning. What we do matters. Of course, what we do always matters, but in times like these, it’s much more obvious that there are no insignificant actions and no insignificant people.

That can be a huge motivator, but it has its downside as well. Without grounding and practice in a moral code of some sort, we can easily do more harm than good. To mean well is not the same as to do well. The thought does count; but leaping into the water to save a drowning child when you never learned to swim can double the burden on those who actually are equipped to help. It can even destroy the possibility of rescue altogether. Whatever the heroic moment is that we imagine we’re going to meet; we’re kidding ourselves if we aren’t training in the small things first so that we’re ready for the bigger challenge. Those small things are typically hard and thankless; they often involve a degree of pain and suffering. But we get through them because we know they have a purpose; they are making us ready for the moment when God and the world need us most.

All that is why God leads the newly-liberated Israelites to Mt. Sinai, where Moses goes up a mountain that is shaking in fire and smoke to receive the law of God. That law is meant to guide the people through the challenges of the desert, while proclaiming through their way of life the nature of the God who liberated them. When mastered, God’s law would make them fit for life in the Promised Land. Known to the Jews as simply the “Ten Words” and to Christians as the “Ten Commandments,” this ancient law code has endured because it can still do the same for us. As our discipline in life’s wilderness, we build the strength and courage necessary to create the liberty and justice for all that we like to go on and on about.

The Exodus story is quite clear that these commandments from God were not imposed on the Israelites. They were offered as the condition of God’s continuing presence and protection. The people could have rejected them if they wanted, and frequently throughout the Bible they did—just as we do—with predictable results. As much as God wanted the beloved community they would foster, true justice is a form of love and you can’t force love. This is a voluntary code and to make it an instrument of coercion turns the code itself into an idol and violates the very law it seeks to enforce.

Moses was never told to put those words on a wall or parade them around, no matter what Roy Moore says. God told Moses to put them in a box and sit on them whenever he served as a judge for the people. They were to be the literal foundation of justice for Israel; and I believe they are still the foundation for justice today. It remains to us to want that enough to choose them.

Often these commands are examined individually, and there’s a place for that. But this morning I want to consider how they work together as a unit, to strengthen and fortify each other, so that we have support if we start to fall and also a path to rebuild if we go completely off the rails. In adopting the law God gave to

the Israelites and applying it to our own time and circumstance, we can build the kind of character that makes clear the nature of the God we profess and that prepares us for our particular calling in the world. But they come as a unit. Either they all work together or they don't work at all.

I think there's an inherent order to the list, which makes the first few commands critical. They are the first line of defense. If those at the top are truly kept, everything else on the list is easily mastered. But those first few are also the most commonly misunderstood: Putting God first isn't talking about the supremacy of any one religion over another. Making an idol doesn't mean not to carve or paint an image of the divine. Taking God's name in vain doesn't have anything to do with swearing. So, I want to spend a bit more time with them.

I'm going to try to avoid using numbers for them, since different traditions number them differently, but I think that whole first section is really all one thing. I would paraphrase its meaning this way: "I'm the God who just freed you from slavery. As I told Moses at the burning bush, I'm the only real God, so don't get tricked into following fake gods made of wood or stone or some other sham construct. I'm the one who freed you, so if you want to stay free, keep me and the things I stand for as your top priority. If you want a different set of priorities than the ones I'm about to share, that's up to you. But if you do choose another way, keep my name out of your mouth. Don't call yourselves my people if you're not going to live by my priorities. Don't take my name in vain." That's what I think the opening words of God's law means.

Last week we talked about the name of God as revealed to Moses at the burning bush. That name was God's essence—God is defined by being; the God who is as opposed to those things that are not. The God who is truth, not lies. By contrast, the story at Mt. Sinai is not about God's essential being but about God's values, those virtues that are cultivated and protected by keeping the law in Exodus 20: Contentment, faithfulness, honesty, reverence for life, respect for others and for the boundaries that make our common life safe and free.

Further, God isn't presenting the law just to make us jump through hoops. It has a two-fold purpose: First, to proclaim the nature of God to the world through our actions; and second, to fulfill the vision of Isaiah 11 where, "The wolf shall live with the lamb...and they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." A world of peace, safety, unity, and justice.

And while it takes each of us as individuals to commit to keeping God's law; the goals are only attainable if we work on them together. We simply are not able to keep them by ourselves, as the world is built for other ends. Our economic structures rely on us coveting what we see in advertisements, stealing the labor of the poor, imprisoned, and vulnerable, and making a day of rest impossible for millions. And that's just economics. The Ten Commandments represent God's path not just to individual morality but to a free and just society.

So, let's see how they work together to help us live together.

Imagine these commandments as a ladder. Standing at the top, we like to think, is us—moral and ethical people that we are. That top rung of our ladder is "No other gods before the one who just set us free and who is asking us to freely accept the laws of self-restraint that follow." Keeping that first rung intact means maintaining a continuous and conscious commitment to all that follows. We commit to making God's priorities our priorities.

If that top rung of commitment to God's priorities breaks, by definition we've adopted an idol; a false God. We have jettisoned the God who is and welcomed in something false. So, both of those rungs break together. If we still insist that we're God's people when we don't really intend to live by those values, then we've taken God's name in vain and that next rung is also gone.

After sliding down that far, we would all be well-served to stop and rest, which is what the Sabbath commandment is about on its face. In a chaotic and broken world, keeping a steady eye on our moral core is challenging and exhausting. We will most certainly fail at living up to God's priorities if we don't stop to rest on a regular basis, and ensure that every living thing also gets that chance. We are all in this together. If others are crashing through the lower rungs because our systems of labor won't allow others to rest, we won't stay on top for very long, even if we ourselves have all the time off in the world. All justice is social justice. If it's justice only for us, it's no longer justice, but privilege.

Without granting the needs of body and soul for rest, we won't have the energy for the hard work of honoring our parents and all those who had a hand in making us who we are as individuals, communities and nations. This is often the work of reconciliation and repentance, and if we don't have the energy for it because we don't regularly rest, a couple more rungs give way.

Now we're down to the rung that says we shouldn't take a life. If we haven't been able to reconcile with others, aren't rested, and have our priorities all skewed, this rung is now a lot weaker. And if that one gives way; if we take a life, whether directly with a gun or indirectly through abuse, neglect, or indifference; it's easy to see how we will have little concern for being faithful to a spouse or respecting the personal or property boundaries of others. Of course, by the time *those* rungs are gone it's second nature to try to lie our way out of it, and end up at the bottom of a broken ladder coveting what everyone else has because we have lost it all.

But here's the gospel part. The good news for those of us who have fallen to the bottom—either individually or collectively—is that the ladder can be rebuilt in the other direction. Starting with the tenth commandment not to covet, we can use the list as a map to rebuild our lives and even our nation. We can work to be grateful for each moment and for whatever we have instead of coveting what we don't.

Practicing gratitude then can be a foundational discipline that leads us to tell the truth about ourselves and others—to remember the truth about the goodness at our core and our right to live freely without abuse and to share those rights with others.

It might take years to shed the practice of false witness that we bear so frequently to ourselves and others, but if we do, we would start to recognize when we take something that doesn't really belong to us; when we rob someone not only of possessions but of dignity, meaningful work, a sense of safety, or their full humanity. And because we've noticed and are supported by the truth, we will make amends. With that new clarity on basic boundaries, we can begin to apply that to the use of our bodies in our sexual expression and learn what it means to be faithful.

The support of all those lower rungs generates more respect for life in all its forms, which not only helps prevent us from wantonly killing but also brings the respect and feelings of empathy for others that we need to honor those who have given us life. Once we're honoring where we came from, we can more easily respect ourselves with a time of rest, giving us the energy to get our priorities in order and finally oust the idols that got us into our messes in the first place.

By that time, we are back at the top of a strong and sturdy ladder and can present ourselves with confidence to the world in God's name. And we're back on the road to creating the beloved community where such a life brings healing to the nations. But we will need every rung of our moral ladder to be as strong as possible to make it so.

Wherever you are on that ladder, hang on and set your gaze higher. Are you sitting in a pile of broken rungs? No matter. These Ten Words from Exodus make up the manual for ladder assembly, as well as the instructions for the care of each rung. As we each build in communion with others, our example becomes an inspiration, until together we bear witness to the grace of God, and the strength from one ladder can help keep another from falling.

In this time of overlapping crises, every one of us—both individually and collectively—has the opportunity to make a real difference. We can literally save the planet and its inhabitants. We can turn swords into plowshares. Indeed, we must. Loving our neighbors has never been harder; and it has never been more critical to our survival. Our actions today can save the grandchild born tomorrow. That's the good news; that is the gospel. Amen.