

Message for the Third Sunday of Lent, March 4, 2018

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Exodus 20:1-17 and Psalm 19:7-10

The space between

It's hard for us to hear the Ten Commandments without feeling scolded. After all, they are presented in the negative and are very direct: "Thou shalt not!" There seems to be no room for discussion. This is a one-way communication. And we are on the cowering, receiving end. This is the law of the Lord and you will obey!

So how, then, do we understand and give credence to the soothing words of the psalmist: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." The words of the law are sure, right, clear and pure. "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb." Are we talking about the same thing?

Some of you have heard me say that I probably wouldn't be in the church today if it weren't for feminist theology. When I was in my twenties I began to read women theologians, these scholars who were steeped in and loved the Bible but came at faith and Biblical interpretation from a different perspective. A perspective I had never heard. A perspective that opened up whole new understandings for me, whole new and life-giving ways of relating to God. Writing in the February 14 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, Debra Dean Murphy says that feminist theologians "made it possible to ask more illuminating questions." That was and continues to be the case for me.

"Feminist theology challenged conceptions of divine power which were distorted by patriarchal norms," Murphy writes. "The best of this work recovered a view of God as a sociality of being. It envisions God's power as a desire for reciprocity and kinship,

not possession or domination. ... To name God's power in such a way is to recognize its non-coercive character." Murphy calls this beauty. Symmetry. Lifesaving reciprocity.

Franciscan Richard Rohr agrees. He says that a far-removed judgmental God is "not a God you fall in love with, because humans are not programmed to fall in love with mere principles and forces. Love demands both give and take, which is what we mean by a 'personal' God. And this is exactly what people of deep prayer invariably experience—*an inner dialogue of give and take, of giving and being received.*"

"Beauty is fairness in every sense of the word," Murphy goes on to say. "Sin's insidious work is to distort our humanity and alienate us from the beauty for which we were made, a beauty that is God's own life: reciprocity and kinship and a symmetry of relations." Give and take, give and take, not cowering under the glare and the threat of an angry judge, but giving and being received.

God desires relationship with us. That's why we were created. God draws us into relationship. God does this even though God knows exactly who we are and how we tend to behave. We are far from perfect. God knows we need help. That's what these rules, these Ten Commandments, are all about. There is an unbreakable covenant between God and us, between God and all humanity and creation. These rules aren't there so that God can decide who's in and who's out. We're all in. No matter what. These rules are given so that we can better understand who God is and what it means to live well with God. These rules help us manage and live into the reciprocal space between.

With this theme of reciprocity in mind, let's take another look at these familiar words. The first three commandments set the stage. They are about God and who God is. They are about our give and take relationship with God and the world.

Commandment #1: You shall have no other gods before me. This is not so much a claim for monotheism – that there is only one god – as it is God's claim on our allegiance. God has already proclaimed God's allegiance to us. If we are to be in this mutual relationship, there will be nothing else in our lives that will detract or subtract from our allegiance to God. If we have our priorities straight the way we live will give an integrated and coherent witness to the primacy of God in our lives and in the world. In this commandment God says, I am to come first in your lives for you are always first for me.

Commandment #2: You shall not make for yourselves an idol. You shall not bow down to or worship idols. There are two ways of thinking about what this commandment means. One has to do with idols, something that is worshipped instead of God. But the Hebrew word translated as "idol," can also be translated "image." That's the other way to look at this: You shall not make for yourselves an image of God. In this case the temptation is not the creation of a rival that detracts from God, but rather to locate and thereby domesticate God in the form of something visible which we control. We construct for ourselves an image of God that reflects only what we know and like about God, or at least what we think we understand about God. By doing this we limit God. We tame God. But God will not be limited or tamed. To do so is extremely short-sighted and disrespectful. God's character will not be distorted. God is so much bigger, so much broader, than we can ever imagine or understand. God is free from any of our

attempts at control. God always has and always will operate out of this vast freedom.

We worship a God who is both with us but also far beyond us. This we must accept with awe and with reverence and with a sense of trust. In this commandment God says, I will not be managed or controlled. And I have given the same freedom to you.

Commandment #3: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God. Yes, swearing is bad. It's lazy and ugly and we shouldn't do it. But that's not what this commandment is about. This commandment has to do with our constant desire to use God for our own purposes. It is an enormous temptation for us to use God's name as a rubber stamp for our own ideas and plans. To claim that what we do of our own volition is done in God's name. But when we do this we diminish and trivialize God to ourselves and others. And we break the trust. In this commandment God says, you can't use me for your own purposes. If we are to live together well, I require honor and respect.

These first three commandments remind us of who God is. They warn us not to take God lightly or to take advantage of this relationship. And they set the stage for the seven commandments that follow. These commandments show us the way to live together with God in community.

Commandment #4: Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. We tend to think this means, go to church on Sunday. (And that is a very good thing to do. Don't let me discourage you.) But really this commandment is about rest. It's about rest for everyone, no matter how important or menial the job, no matter how significant or insignificant the person, or even the animal, might be in the eyes of society. It's about stepping back and taking stock of what it is that you are involved in with such intensity.

It's about allowing everyone the time and space to do this. The Sabbath is a time for nurturing respect and dignity. It's a periodic, disciplined, regular disengagement from the systems of productivity that tend to use people, land and animals, up to exhaustion. In this commandment God says, I want us to be healthy. It's OK to let go. Let's all stop on a regular basis and rest.

Commandment #5: Honor your father and your mother. We parents like this one, of course. But it doesn't mean that children should slavishly follow everything a parent has to say. Instead it's about respect, which seems to be a recurring theme. To honor is to give weight to. We are to give weight to what our parents and our grandparents have experienced. We are to listen with respect to what they have learned and who they are. We do this because it is important that we know where we come from, and what our story is. It is important for our own well-being and for the well-being of future generations. In this commandment God says, let's remember and honor our histories. Let's listen with respect to each other and to those who've gone before.

Commandment #6: You shall not murder. Human life belongs to God and must be respected. Always. This includes our own lives as well as the lives of those who are on the margins of society, those who have done wrong, those who are innocent, and those who would be considered our enemies. All of us are protected. We are all cherished. In this commandment God says, your lives – all of them, dear people – are precious to me. No matter what.

Commandment #7: You shall not commit adultery. God recognizes the elemental mysterious nature of human sexuality. It is how we were created. We are to be aware of the intense power wrapped up in this mystery and treat this, too, with respect.

We are not to take our intimate relationships lightly. In them we are called to faithfulness, a faithfulness which reflects God faithfulness to us. We are called to respect our bodies and the bodies of others, bodies created by God. We are called to be aware of the sexuality that drives and shapes us. We do this for our own good and for the good of the society around us. Distorted and unhealthy sexual relations lead to distorted and unhealthy human relations and a distortion of our relationship with God. In this commandment God says, the intimacy that we share and that you share with one other is a powerful, precious gift that needs to be guarded and cherished.

Commandment #8: You shall not steal. This is not necessarily a defense of private property, though property is involved. Instead this commandment calls us to recognize that every person needs a certain amount of “goods” in order to live a life of dignity. Don’t take away, don’t steal that which makes someone’s life possible and meaningful. In addition to not stealing cars or TVs or money that belongs to someone else, we are not to steal away job opportunities, or access to health care or education, or people’s ability to get what is needed to live. If those around us don’t have enough, there’s probably some stealing going on. In this commandment God calls us to a heightened awareness of what is good for our neighbor, of what causes our neighbors to struggle or to thrive. In this commandment God says, make sure you don’t have more than your share while others have less than they need. The relationship between Me and you is all about caring well for others.

Commandment #9: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. According to Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, this commandment is about telling the truth in court. This is a recognition, he says, that community life is not

possible unless there is a place, an arena, in which there is public confidence that what is happening in society will be reliably described and reported. (Does this sound relevant or what?) There must be a place to bring grievances and expect that they will be heard. Healthy community living requires drawing a line against private interest in order to make social relations workable. We are called to cooperate with systems that work for justice. In this commandment God says, I value everyone's experience and perspective. Everyone has a right to be treated fairly. Everyone has a right to be heard.

Commandment #10: You shall not covet things that belong to your neighbor. This commandment is all about the destructive power of desire. Living out of greed destroys community. God calls us to put on the brakes, to curb our drive to acquire more and more, and to reorient ourselves away from this destructive cycle. In this final commandment God calls us to remember where our deepest allegiance lies and who it is that we worship. Enough is enough, God says. You'll be OK with less. Our life together is about so much more than things.

So, you see, my sisters and brothers, there's more to these commandments than meets the eye, or more applicably, the ear. Though they are serious, they aren't meant to scold or shame us. Instead they given to us so that we can be drawn into an ever closer relationship with God and each other. The law of the Lord is indeed, as the psalmist says, the stuff of sweetness, a thing of beauty. This is the beauty for which we were made, a beauty that is God's own life: reciprocity and kinship and a symmetry of relations.

"I have made a covenant between me and you and every living creature that is with you and for all future generations," God says. Come and live well with me in the space between. Amen.

