

*Pilgrim or Tourist?*

World Communion/Peacemaking Sunday

PPC

4 October 2020

Philippians 3:4b-16

Exodus 20:1-20

When I was the Christian Ed. Director at Third Church in Rochester, I visited the first grade classroom one Sunday when they were studying the Ten Commandments. Things were going along fine as they discussed what each commandment meant until they got to the one “Thou shall not commit adultery”. One small boy wanted to know more details on that. As the teachers looked at one another, I could tell by the look on their faces they weren’t sure how to respond to this query. Finally, one teacher answered the question as best she could by saying something like, “It means that you have to have a license to get married and have children.” The small boy smacked his forehead and with frustration in his voice exclaimed, “A license? A license? I’m not even old enough to have a driver’s license!” We all laughed and left that conversation hanging.

Sometimes I wonder if we don’t all arrive at that frustrated moment in our lives when we consider the Ten Commandments. If you’re old enough, you’ll remember how everyone laughed when Jimmy Carter confessed to committing adultery in his heart.

The Ten Commandments provoke controversy from time to time. There is the continual national argument over displaying them publicly - ironically usually when they are etched in stone - in courthouse buildings and other public venues. They are worshiped not for their content but for the message they convey: we are a Christian nation and this display proves it. Never mind that they’re the words of Moses, not Jesus. Sadly, whether we obey them and keep them at the heart of our life together

isn't the point of the argument. After all, in those courtrooms in the south where people want them displayed, outside of the rule of law the courtrooms turned a blind eye to the murder of Black men by lynching mobs. Today, our jails are disproportionately populated by young, Black men. If we actually lived out the intention behind the law, we would have to be changed as a nation.

When Jesus talks about the Law, he is talking about Torah, or the Pentateuch, known as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. More specifically, most scholars believe that the book of Deuteronomy was the major source of the Law since it was the scroll discovered when the Babylonian exiles returned to Jerusalem. The reply that Jesus gives when he is asked by the Pharisees to sum up the Law is a quote from Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Jesus replies: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40). The law, then, represents God’s loving care and God’s loving wisdom in helping us to shape our lives in faithful ways. Our obedience to them is, in turn, a grateful, loving response to this care.

Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, talks about how he was a zealous follower of the law; indeed, he was a Pharisee who tracked down Christians to put them to death because of his passionate belief in the law. However, in his dramatic experience of meeting the living Christ on the road to Damascus, he now has a different understanding of what the law means. While this new view doesn't negate the old law, he sees with new eyes now. Paul leads us to a new perspective so that we see

the law and the commandments instructing us on how to honor the holiness and blessing of life.

Here, in this story from Exodus, the commandments are a record of the Mosaic Torah. They are repeated in the book of Deuteronomy. As we hear the commandments, we must also hear the preamble: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:1-2). In other words, the commandments are given not as an obligation but as a recognition of how much God loves the people. From the start, God establishes the rules as they focus on relationship. We want to follow the law because the God who frees the oppressed, loves us.

In the first four commandments God instructs the Israelites on how they are to honor their special relationship with God. The remaining six commandments are instructions on how we are to treat one another. "Honor your mother and father, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, you shall not covet anything of your neighbor's." If only we could carry these out what a different world we might be living in right now.

There are too many today who call themselves Christians and persist in treating their neighbors in hurtful and punishing ways. What do white supremacy groups have to do with God's desires for us? The only relationship that seems to matter to them is the one they have with their guns. Attacking others, treating people who live on the margins or whose skin is the wrong color, using violence to achieve their goals - whether physically or verbally abusive - is not acting within the intent of the Ten Commandments. If we are silent on this issue, we are complicit. Like many of you, my

marching days are over. What can we do as a congregation, a community of faith, to raise our voices and not be silent, especially in this pandemic? Could we start a letter campaign? Could we look for ways to spend our mission money to support peacemaking groups?

The deliverance of the law to the people of YHWH God is not a one time happening in a moment of time in the nation of Israel. It is a covenant - a way that God invites us to be in relationship with the holy. We must strive to live these laws every moment of our lives. Personally, I struggle greatly with that “thou shall not covet”. As Jeremiah writes, our hearts must be circumcised so that we truly reflect what we are called to be. In times like these, perhaps, it may feel like God is very far away but God is here.

On this journey that we call life, are you a pilgrim or a tourist? Are you willing to engage in relationship with God and others and endure the discomfort that that may bring? Or, will you choose instead to be a tourist? Tourists visit different lands and view what they see and hear from a distance. While visiting foreign places as a tourist is broadening to our life experience, we never have to fully engage with the stranger. The journey we call life demands more of us. One commentator wrote: “If our faith has become security-centered rather than Christ centered, our ministry will lack daring and boldness. We will be unwilling to take a responsible risk when called upon... Yet, how many of us will continue to wander in our own private wilderness for years, denying ourselves the promised land because we are too committed to security, to a ‘playing it safe’ attitude which keeps us in bondage? Our identity crisis as Christians is

fundamentally a matter of commitment...There is a difference between a pilgrim and a tourist...The pilgrim understands there is no lasting home here.”

Do we care more about the economy than the plight of the hundreds of thousands who are now unemployed? Or dead because of the coronavirus?

We are so intent on having security in this life. We act as if we are in control, as if we can avoid death and taxes, as if we are certain that because we live in the USA, we won't become refugees. We act like the Pharisees who interpreted the law. If we find people who are not, in our view, obedient to it, we point our fingers and push those people to the edge of society. We can boast that we know the law, that we are Christians and we follow the law carefully. Look around you, though, and look at the results of what happens when we treat the law differently for some people.

Moving to Hungary in the early nineties was a shock to my system. Everything I had been taught about Hungary and the conditions there had to be forgotten as I came to learn a new culture. When I was growing up we lived in fear of those countries that were “behind the Iron Curtain.” “Those” people were God-less, intent on obliterating religion in the world. What a surprise when I learned that Hungarian people were hospitable and friendly, welcoming us to their country in which we were strangers. They all wanted to improve their English! And then, to discover that there had been people worshipping all the time during that long, Cold War, further surprised me. They had been worshipping under circumstances that we, as Americans, can't even imagine. If you admitted to being a Christian, your job prospects immediately disappeared. The pastor who led those worshippers was arrested many times in the early morning hours. Hungarians had much to teach me about faith and relationship. Worshipping in

America never threatened our well-being or our lives. For the faithful in Hungary in those years of Soviet control, the choice between being a pilgrim or a tourist was vivid and real.

What will we choose to be? In our present day journeys, there is a glow that hangs over the past for those of us who are white in this nation. Those were the perfect times when the non-whites stayed in their places. When we hang onto the past, we are merely tourists. When our desire for material wealth and security is greater than our desire to know God, what kind of people will we be?

Pilgrims know where home really lies. We know that we need one another to give life meaning and blessing. Pilgrims know that without God and the relationship that God wants to have with us, we are kept wandering in the wilderness. There is meaning in the course of our lives if we choose the path to God.

Pilgrim, here is where our hope must lie. In our relationships with one another, in our recognition that we need others just as much as they need us, we acknowledge that God is a loving and merciful God.

Those Ten Commandments aren't worth the rock they were carved on if they aren't written on our hearts and lived out in our relationships. We don't need visible reminders in public places - we can find those reminders in the faces of those around us when we treat them with love and respect.

When we can love our neighbor - stranger and friend -we find the love of God among us. God is still here - calling us by name, welcoming us home. There, in the land of milk and honey, and peace and love and joy.

May it be so.

