

Third Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2009

Exodus 20:1-17 Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. ¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God

made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Our story begins with a commandment. I don't necessarily mean our individual stories, though as I reflect upon my story I suppose my story begins there, too. I don't remember much of my very early story, so I can't say for certain whether commandments were among the first things I learned. I remember better the early stories of my children and I recall "thou shalt not" played a prominent role in early childhood, along with a healthy dose of "thou shalt." We trust by our actions and attitudes our children learn about love. We also want them to comprehend the meaning of "no," which seems a far greater struggle than understanding the meaning of "yes." Permission is most always assumed; denial comes as a surprise, accompanied by struggle. Much of childhood is spent attempting to change "no" into "yes," or at least into "maybe." Much of parenthood is spent attempting to convince children "no" means "no;" few have trouble believing "yes" means "yes." The struggle with commandments doesn't stop with childhood or adolescence; many of us spend much of our lives believing rules are great for other people but should not apply to us. Speed limit signs are suggestions for those who aren't in a hurry; the tax code is meant to be bent if not broken. Everyone does it, which somehow makes it right, which was an argument our children unsuccessfully used to convince us of the importance of "no" becoming "yes." Most everyone takes "yes" for granted; people have to learn the meaning of "no."

Take Adam and Eve, for example, which is most likely the way they are intended to be taken. Even before Adam made his entrance into Eden God had been commanding. God spoke creation, which is way of saying God commanded creation into existence. God didn't beckon creation to come over to where God was. Out of the formless void God spoke the world into being; God commanded the sun, moon and stars; God commanded the plants and animals to vegetate and populate. God took dust of the earth and by God's spirit breathed life into Adam, commanding him to be. And once he was, God commanded Adam regarding what he could and could not do. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." [Genesis 2:16-17] A few verses later

Eve is created and soon after, the reader assumes, Adam related to her God's "yes" and "no" regarding the trees and their fruit. Though they may have appeared full-grown the first couple was not very old and certainly had little life experience. I suppose they were adult toddlers still learning about "no," believing deep down within them every "no" can be a "yes," especially if no one seems to be looking. The talking serpent offers encouragement, though I doubt they needed much to believe forbidden fruit was permissible. How much encouragement do we need? And we've been at this a good bit longer than Adam or Eve. Perhaps if God really wanted them not to eat the fruit of the tree God should have told them it was good for them. To tell them it was off-limits was an invitation for transgression.

Since that fateful sinful day willful disobedience of God's commandments has been part of our spiritual DNA, so the story and theology's traditional interpretation of it goes. God is commander-in-chief and we are chiefly disobedient. Tell us what not to do and that's the very thing we want most to do. We can help ourselves; self-restraint is a virtue. But we are not always diligent and find it impossible consistently to behave as we should, which makes our story sound like any pre-schooler's struggle. We grow larger but we do not always grow up.

Sometimes God asks a disobedient child to be a commander. Moses is a prime example of God calling someone to proclaim God's commandments. Moses, a tongue-tied and flawed man who killed an Egyptian to prevent him from killing a Hebrew, met God at a burning bush, an encounter that began with Moses commanded to remove his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. In the encounter Moses was commanded to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go, to release them from their bondage. Moses reluctantly agreed to comply and Pharaoh adamantly refused. After ten plagues Pharaoh's "no" became "yes" and Moses led the people on the journey to the Promised Land. Soon after the journey began so did the commandments. The newly-freed people stopped to worship and Moses received instructions written on stone on behalf of all the people. This Decalogue, these ten words, the Ten

Commandments form the basis of relationship shared between God and humanity. God declared the boundaries, what was acceptable and what was out of bounds. This time it wasn't in a garden but in a desert; this time it wasn't a particular fruit to be avoided, but a way of living fruitfully that was encouraged. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt," the preamble states, which is another way of reminding humanity God created us. Out of the chaos of slavery God formed us into a people. God spoke the word, and Moses relayed the word, and our world was set in motion.

The commandments were broken before Moses could walk down the mountain where he received them. His brother, Aaron, participated in the act of willful disobedience. Other gods were worshipped; tangible images were created to represent what is beyond and more than anything made with one's hands or seen with one's eyes. The people longed for a god they could understand, easily comprehend, a god they could touch, taste and feel. But gods that can be handled aren't God, because God is more than we can handle.

The commandments seem more than we can handle, too. Or perhaps that's the point. We want to handle the commandments; we want to believe if we live them we possess them and God is in our debt because we made checkmarks in all the appropriate boxes of life. We want to handle the commandments so we can convince ourselves we have fulfilled them, interpreting them in ways which better suit our needs, desires and circumstances. We want to remember the Sabbath day as we eat out after church knowing someone had to work so we wouldn't. We print "In God We Trust" upon our money to convince ourselves we don't place confidence in the accumulation of goods and funds, never wondering if putting God's name on our coins might be using God's name empty, in vain. We wonder what it means to honor one's mother or father if one's mother or father is abusive. We are grateful adultery in Moses' day was basically a property rights infringement, a diminishment of one man's possession by another man. Even when we expand the notion to encompass sexual infidelities transgressing marriage relationships I think we fall short of what the commandment ultimately indicates. What if

adultery is giving someone or something what one's spouse rightfully deserves. If that's true then I suspect we all are adulterers even when we have been sexually faithful. "Thou shalt not kill" becomes "You shall not murder," according to the New Revised Standard Version from which we read, a translation which is an interpretation as all translations are. Since the Hebrews used capital punishment for a number of offenses did the commandment mean one's life should not be forfeited without justification or cause or due process. Is that an interpretation, a mis-interpretation or an unsuitable application?

Commandments provide us an opportunity to make them what we want them to be, to hear them as we want to hear them, to allow "no" to become "maybe" or "yes." Perhaps the Sabbath is the clearest example, since few of us actually believe the commandment means what it says. We schedule meetings at church on Sunday, saying it's the Lord's work. Some of us have to work on Sunday; the world has changed and there's no time for a day of rest in the midst of a consumer driven economy. Chick-fil-A may be able to close on Sunday, but few other restaurants can and make a go of it. We'd like to keep the spirit of the law but find it impossible to keep the commandment as it is written. After all even the Hebrews found it necessary to do some work on the Sabbath; we just think more work is necessary than they did. Referees have ball games to call; television stations have games to broadcast. If my child gets sick I want to go to the hospital and know folks are working there. If my car needs gasoline I want to be able to purchase it. I want the electricity to work at my house even if it is Sunday, so someone needs to work to make it so.

Perhaps the Sabbath commandment is not as important as others on the list of ten. Maybe it comes in at number ten, though it has a higher number on the traditional listing. Perhaps the Sabbath commandment is an indication of how we understand and apply all the commandments. Perhaps it shows commandments are always subject to interpretation, and helps us realize the clearest language can become confusing if one applies sufficient effort to the task.

Jesus brought some clarity to the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. He began with “you have heard it said” and worked his way to “but I say to you.” He offered interpretations of commandments which never sought to diminish their significance but expand their importance. Jesus didn’t try to explain them away, tell his hearers why the commandment could be overlooked or discarded. Instead Jesus said the heart of the matter was a matter of the heart. Thou shall not kill becomes you shouldn’t be angry or call your brother or sister a name, implying anger and name calling are possible preludes to killing. Thou shall not commit adultery becomes don’t lustfully look at another, for lust can lead to adultery. Jesus asked folks to consider the root of the problem rather than simply dealing with the full grown plant. It’s easier to pull up a sapling than cut down a tree.

Jesus wasn’t trying to avoid the commandments. He had not come to deny them or to empty them of meaning. He came to fulfill the law, which means far more than he came to live in accordance with the law, to abide the law. He filled the law full when he emptied himself and lived as God called him to live. He lived that way, I believe, not out of fear of punishment or hope for reward. Jesus lived as a child of God because he discovered he was a child of God and recognized others as God’s children. He found life, joy, love and fulfillment living that way. He lived so we might begin to understand what it means to live life in all its abundance, an abundance that cannot be measure by possessions or portfolios.

As story is told regarding the actor/comedian W. C. Fields. Someone saw him reading a Bible, and the person was surprised because Fields never indicated he was a religious man. He asked why Fields was reading a Bible and Fields responded, “I’m looking for loopholes.” I suppose all of us have looked for loopholes and come short of the glory of God. Commandments provide opportunities for creating loopholes by those who are dedicated to the task of finding ways of not doing what is reasonable for us to do. As the snake said, “Surely God did not mean that when you eat of the fruit you will die.” Surely God hasn’t meant a great deal of what God is reported to have said. At least one hopes not, otherwise we’re in trouble.

I suspect we are in trouble. We always have been, it seems. We make God in our image, handle and form God so God makes good sense and says the things we like to hear. We want demonstrable proof of God, some proclamation that is beyond interpretation and refutation. We want it all to make sense: want life to make sense, want our suffering to make sense, want our success to make sense. We want existence to be rational, and life refuses to comply. Senseless acts and senseless deeds are beyond reason, which makes them in the minds of some, beyond God. We want a sign to show us our fears are unreasonable. We want signs to indicate the power of God, to prove God will take care of us, to indicate God will triumph over evil and cruelty.

All we have is a cross. I cannot give a reason for the cross, at least not one that will satisfy everyone. It is a sign of the cruelty of humanity, of anger, hatred, fear and despair that leads to the death of self and others. It is a grace-filled atrocity, a divinely human act of humility, obedience and love. When one determines to live as God requires one discovers commands etched in stone are far less important than commands etched in one's heart. These heart-engraved commands do not abrogate the ones borne from Sinai but expand them and multiply them until there are only two that remain and encompass all others: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. When one lives that way it frightens all who find solace in words etched in stone, words that can be weathered away by the constant winds of culture and reason. When one lives that way the certainty of being right is replaced by the certainty of being God's child. When one lives that way one lives foolishly because so much of life is contrary to contemporary wisdom and thought. It is foolish to love one's enemies, isn't it? It is foolish to live knowing there is a cross in your hand and a hill before you. It is foolish to live in obedience to commands others think can be ignored or side-stepped.

Jesus becomes a stumbling block, in part, because he's in the way of us going where we want to go, doing what we want to do. There's a cross in the middle of our path, partially blocking our way, and we have to either step around it or pick it up. And if we pick it up, we have to decide whether

we will carry it or lay it down again. And if we put it down will we place it so it will not impede our way again? There's nothing wrong with the commandments. It's what we do with them that's wrong. If we aren't careful we will treat the cross the same way. We'll make it reasonable, not foolish. We'll find a way it all makes sense. We'll develop theologies enabling us to believe what we want to believe. We'll create theories of atonement to explain how God did what God did, how Jesus did what Jesus did, and how we benefitted as a consequence. And all of a sudden the cross doesn't seem so foolish or irrational.

When that happens we have substituted a commandment for the unreasonable gift of grace that God shares with us and invites us to accept. For the cross is not a commandment; it's an invitation to accept the unmerited unreasonable grace of God. It is the wisdom and foolishness of the One who speaks the language of commandments with an accent of grace.

PS Let me offer one indication of how foolish God's grace and love are. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that love keeps no record of wrongs. 1 John chapter 4 tells us God is love. Since God is love, then God must not keep a record of wrongs, which makes forgiveness, grace and God much more and far different than we have often thought.

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