

Walking Out of Slavery

I've not preached on the Ten Commandments as a whole in my preaching career. There are a couple of reasons for this. One is that for much of the last couple of decades, the Ten Commandments have been part of the so-called "Culture Wars" in the U.S. and I wasn't of a mind to add fuel to the fire on one side or the other. And I'm not going to do that today, either, but if you really want to know what I think of the controversy over the posting of this section of Scripture in public places, we can have that conversation later. Just remember that it was Baptists who introduced the concept of freedom of religion into the laws of the American colonies and then into the U.S. Constitution. Second, I've always assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that the Ten Commandments were so ingrained in the consciousness of most Christians and Jews that they really didn't need any further comment by me. And, finally, I've never really had a good handle on how to approach the Commandments as a whole. I've considered a sermon series on each of, or several of, the Commandments individually but that series has never seemed to be a priority.

So, when I saw that one chapter of Brian McLaren's book, We Make the Road by Walking, was devoted to Exodus 20, I was dubious. That book offers an alternate to the standard lectionaries that I've been using for preaching schedules and has, I think, a good approach for us. But I just wasn't sure I wanted to tackle this passage. Then, as occasionally happens, my studies for preaching interacted in my mind with some other reading I was doing, with sermons I'd preached recently, and with events in my life and the broader world. So, with reference to ideas that Brian McLaren raises, to a book by one of my former professors, and to the theme of our recent Evergreen Association Annual Meeting, here are my thoughts on the Ten Commandments.

The background for our passage this morning, as I told the kids earlier, is the story of the Exodus, the great story of how God intervened in the plight of Children of Israel who had become slaves in Egypt. God heard them cry out against their mistreatment and acted miraculously to convince Pharaoh to let the people go and then to save them from Pharaoh's army when the Egyptian emperor changed his mind. This story, perhaps even more than the story of the covenant between God and Abraham, has formed the identity of the Jewish people to this day. It's also been claimed by a number of other peoples who have been enslaved and mistreated. Most famously for us, perhaps, the story of the Exodus is a vital part of the underpinnings of African-American Christianity. The theme of release from captivity provides a strong thread in African-American hymnody and preaching. One of the great heroines of African-American history, Harriet Tubman, was so well-known for her repeated journeys to bring captive Blacks north to freedom through the Underground Railroad that she became known as "Moses." I'm looking forward to seeing the new movie about her life that's just been released.

The story of the Exodus has also been understood, by both Jews and Christians, as operating on a spiritual level, offering hope not only to nations of enslaved people but also to individuals struggling with captivity of various kinds. This is why the prophet is recorded in Isaiah 61 as saying, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." We remember that this also forms the basis of what has been called "Jesus' Mission Statement" in Luke 4:18-19, quoted by Jesus in his sermon at Nazareth.

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We continue to realize the need for release from captivity, both for groups and individuals and both literally and spiritually in our world today. This is why the theme for the recent annual meeting of our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches was “Release the Captives!” We heard together and discussed stories of the literal captivity of national groups: the minorities of Myanmar, exploited at home and crowded into camps in Indonesia and further exploited there, and the World War II captivity of Japanese-Americans, imprisoned in concentration camps not far from us simply due to their heritage. We heard about the ongoing effects of slavery and segregation, even today, on African-Americans in mass incarceration and asset inequity. We heard about individuals caught up in the modern slavery of human trafficking. There was also conversation about how some of the same camps in which we imprisoned Japanese-Americans are now being used to hold Latino/a immigrants without regard to human rights. The need for God’s people to take up the cause of freeing the captives is still very much with us.

And then there are the other slaveries to which individuals in our society are still held in thrall. Just as the Children of Israel were forced into labor by Pharaoh, today Americans have to work more hours for a radically shrinking share of the national wealth. We’re not being made to make bricks without straw, but the U.S. middle class continues to shrink and the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Economic disparity and, yes, slavery is part of the facts of life today. As McLaren writes, “On a social level, in today’s version of Pharaoh’s economy, millions at the bottom of the pyramid work like slaves from before dawn to after dark and still never get ahead.”

Nor is the only slavery that we face economic. I’ll use Brian McLaren’s words again here: “On a personal level, we know what it is to be enslaved to fear, alcohol, food, rage, worry, lust, shame, inferiority, or control.” Our politicians and merchants play on these passions that enslave us for their own ends. We are told who to fear, what to desire, why we cannot possibly be worthy without their leadership or product. We need a way out of these slaveries. We need the freedom that only God can provide.

Our road to freedom, just as it was in the time of Moses, is rarely an easy, point-to-point path. Instead, we struggle, we wander, we get off course. Metaphorically, we are the new wanderers in the wilderness. And this is where those ancient Ten Commandments come to bear. They are part of our roadmap of how to live lives of freedom. When God gave the commandments to Moses, they came to a people who didn’t know how to live in freedom. They had been enslaved for generations, their every movement overseen and regulated. We have been born into freedom, but we still need guidance from God on how to make use of that freedom. We need what Brian McLaren calls “(a) moral basis for (our) lives in freedom.”

So far this morning, you’ve heard a version of the Ten Commandments written for kids and the one from our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Here’s Brian McLaren’s translation, with some commentary by me:

1. “Put the God of liberation first, not the gods of slavery.” Don’t devote your lives to the things that keep you enslaved, whether that’s drugs, money, power, or anything else.
2. “Don’t reduce God to the manageable size of an idol...” If you can completely understand God or if God seems never to challenge you, that’s not God.

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3. “Do not use God for your own agenda by throwing around God’s holy name.” That one speaks for itself.
4. “Honor the God of liberation by taking and giving everyone a day off.” This one speaks to me as I tend to make myself available too many hours in the day and week. But it also reminds us that statistics like the ones showing that minimum-wage workers need to work 100 hrs./wk. to afford an apartment are an offense to God.
5. “Turn from self-centeredness by honoring your parents.” A good place to start, don’t you think?
6. “Don’t kill people,” hello, capital punishment, “and don’t do the things that frequently incite violence.” McLaren makes the remainder of the Commandments a subset of this one.
7. “Don’t cheat with others’ spouses.”
8. “Don’t steal others’ possessions.”
9. “Don’t lie about others’ behaviors or characters.”
10. “In fact, if you really want to avoid the violence of the old slave economy, deal with its root source – the drama of desire.”

Those key concepts form a pretty good basis for living a life of true freedom, for living a life that has health and integrity, a life that honors God and our neighbors. Of course, even when we can reduce the difficult issues of life down to such simple concepts, we find that it is still ever so easy to get off track. Just this week, I finished reading a book on living the Christian life, “Christian Ethics,” if you like the seminary curriculum term. It was, in fact, written by the professor from whom I studied Christian Ethics, the late Dr. Glen Harold Stassen. Glen and his family were members of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, as were Connie and I, so I got to know him over the years and we kept in touch as, much like Charlie and Pam, he moved to Fuller Theological Seminary after the fundamentalist takeover of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, although Glen was based at Fuller-Pasadena, rather than Fuller Northwest. The book, published in 2012, just months before Glen’s death from cancer, was the last of eleven which he wrote or for which he was a significant contributor, and is titled, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age*. In it, Dr. Stassen looks at how we can fully live into the calling of Jesus on our lives in a time when our society seems, at best, indifferent and, at worst, outright hostile to the Jesus Way. He draws on a number of other authors, perhaps most heavily on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, teacher, and ethicist who was executed in the last days of World War II for his opposition to Hitler and involvement in a plot to assassinate the German *Führer*.

In his chapter on “A Realistic Understanding of Sin and Selfhood,” Stassen quotes extensively from Bonhoeffer’s confession of sin in his great work, *Ethics*. In speaking of his own sins, the sins of the German Church and the German nation, Bonhoeffer bases his confession explicitly on the Ten Commandments. Although Bonhoeffer wrote specifically of himself, his church, and his nation, I think it’s worthwhile for me to read from Stassen’s paraphrase and Bonhoeffer’s own words in which I see many parallels to my own life, the church in the United States, and our nation. Like the Germans of the Weimar Republic and then the Third Reich, we continue to struggle to find a way to enjoy our freedoms while still honoring both God and our fellow human beings. Here’s some of Glen Stassen’s paraphrase of Bonhoeffer:

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“(Bonhoeffer’s) confession echoes themes that we have seen in his profound diagnosis of our solidarity in sin. He names the church’s timidity, its deviations and concessions to Nazi beliefs, its withholding the compassion it owes to the despised and rejected (Jews), its silence when it should have cried out to those who were crying out to God, *as evidence of its godlessness and idolatrous loyalty to the Nazi ideology rather than to the one God*. It has made *wrongful use of the name of Christ* by not resisting the misuse of that name for evil ends. It has *not kept the Sabbath holy* “because its preaching of Jesus Christ has been so weak and its public worship so limp.” It has not opposed *contempt for the dignity of parents* by the Nazi youth organization, thus destroying countless families and being guilty for the self-divinizing of youth. It has witnessed *murder and hatred* “without raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways of rushing to help them. It has become guilty of the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ,” clearly meaning Jews, the brothers and sisters of Jesus.”

At this point, Stassen switches to more direct quotation from Bonhoeffer. “It (the church) has found no strong or authentic message to set against the *disdain for chastity and the proclamation of sexual licentiousness*. It has looked on silently as *the poor were exploited and stolen from*, while the strong were enriched and corrupted. It has not condemned the *false witness of those who destroyed the lives of countless people by slander, denunciation, and defamation...* It has *coveted* security, tranquility, peace, property and honor to which it had no claim, and therefore has not bridled human covetousness, but promoted it.” My friends, I cannot read those words from Bonhoeffer this morning without thinking of our own beloved country, the public stance of many churches, or of my own complicity in sin and evil.

But there is, as always, thanks be to God, good news. In yet another version of the Ten Commandments story, this one in [The Jesus Storybook Bible](#), by Sally Lloyd-Jones, the chapter ends like this: “No matter how hard they tried, they could never keep God’s rules all the time. God knew they couldn’t. And God wanted them to know it, too. Only one Person could keep all the rules. And many years later God would send him – to stand in their place and be perfect for them. Because the rules couldn’t save them. Only God could save them.”

We are here this morning because we follow the One who was perfect for us, the One who loves us so much that he was willing even to die for us, the One who said, “this is my body broken for you... this is my blood shed for you.” We recognize this morning that we continue to struggle to live in God’s rules for life, that we continue to struggle with bondage to sin. But Jesus came to release the prisoners, even those who are imprisoned by their own stubbornness. And so, there is hope for us, my sisters and my brothers: hope in the rules we have from God, hope in the body broken and the blood spilled, hope in the love of God in Christ Jesus which blesses us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.