

Sermon – Laws of the Heart
Sunday, March 8, 2015
Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-20
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 20:1-17. The Ten Commandments were presented by Moses at Mount Sinai in 1200 BCE following the Hebrews extraordinary rescue from Egyptian slavery. The God who gave them their freedom now offers guidelines and boundaries by which to live within the covenantal relationship. One of life's great paradoxes is that boundaries and limitations enhance life. Without the structure of laws, life can become anarchy and chaos. Terence Fretheim points out that eight of the Ten Commandments are negatively formulated. He contends that this opens up life rather than close it down; that is, they focus on the outer limits of conduct rather than specific behaviors. Their primary concern is not to create the human community but to protect it from behaviors that have the potential for destroying it. We will read our first scripture reading responsively today. You are all invited to turn to the bulletin insert.

Then God spoke all these words: 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.

Celebrate love at the centre of every moment and every day. This is God's way.

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. 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Celebrate the images of God all around without having to capture it in stone.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name.

Celebrate God's name and bless the world when you speak it.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.

Celebrate the wonders of God by finding the space and the time to revel in nothing but God.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Celebrate those who gave you birth and fed you on love.

You shall not murder.

Celebrate by seeking out the life in each person.

You shall not commit adultery.

Celebrate the value and worth of the people around you.

You shall not steal.

Celebrate the wealth of life in sharing all you have.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Celebrate the truth by witnessing to the good in the other.

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.

Celebrate what God has given you, the unique gifts and attributes that make you, you.

This is the word of the Lord.

As we turn to John's gospel, chapter 2, verses 13-29 we remember that Jesus, as a Rabbi, studied and honored God's law. Perhaps that is why he was so offended when he saw these laws, which were intended to provide wholeness and equity, being used to justify an unjust system of exchanging money for burnt offerings in the temple. When the Book of John was written around 90 CE, the practice of burnt offerings had ended with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. John places this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke who place the story right before Jesus' crucifixion. John is less concerned with the chronological order of Jesus' ministry and uses some literary license in developing theological themes around the meaning of Jesus as the Word becoming flesh. Hear now the reading of holy scripture.

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. **15** Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. **16** He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" **17** His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." **18** The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" **19** Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." **20** The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" **21** But he was speaking of the temple of his body. **22** After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The title of the sermon – "Laws of the Heart"

The Text: "But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body." John 2:21

Let us pray, Holy and Loving God, keep us honest on our journeys—speak to us anew, write your law and your wisdom upon our hearts. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The metaphor of a "journey" for our life with Christ is one that resonates with many of us. Understanding God's loving presence as a traveling companion offers us strength to keep on walking when the way is difficult.

Dr. Joanna von Wijk-Bos, a Presbyterian theologian, recalls long bicycle rides home from high school in the Netherlands where she grew up. The journey along the Poplar lined road that took her home would be long, cold and lonely. When it became dark, she would be frightened, unsure of

what was ahead. Then, far off, she would see a bike's headlamp; and would wonder who else was on the road, hoping it would be her mother, who sometimes rode out to meet her part of the way. When she heard her mother's voice call out, "Is it you?" there was, at those moments nothing so comforting as her mother's presence, a presence that spelled home for her.

As I continue my faith journey, there have been headlights and voices along the way that have guided me home on cold, dark evenings. Some of those voices over the years have been close friends and family. Some of them have been theologians and authors who help me see my life and God's word in new and enlightening ways: Henri Nouwen, Jack Rogers, Judith Viorst, to name a few. More recently I have been accompanied on my journey by the writings of Joan Chittister, a leading voice in contemporary spirituality for more than 25 years. The insights that this Benedictine Sister offers in her book *The Ten Commandments; Laws of the Heart* are shared in this reflection. Several of us read her book during Lent in 2014 as a part of the Adult Education Forum. She is also the author of *The Story of Ruth: 12 Moments in Every Woman's Life* which the PW Circle Ruth and Naomi are reading this year.

When Moses came down from the mountain, scripture says, he came with two tablets of law. On the first tablet were the first four commandments. On the second were the last six.

The first tablet, the rabbis taught, had to do with our relationship to God as supreme, all holy and worthy of worship. These commandments insist that God is a "Thou" and not an "it," who is to be honored, respected, feared and held with deep affection and high esteem. God is not a means to our end. God cannot be used for our purposes. The first question of the Shorter Catechism asks *What is the chief end of humankind?* The answer: *to glorify and enjoy God forever.*

Commandments five through ten on the second tablet teach us to honor our neighbor even as we honor God. Brothers and sisters are not to be exploited, diminished, trivialized or used for our means. We are to have reverence for God and we are to have reverence for the life God created.

According to Joan Chittister, the awareness that God is, and that we are accountable to God, is the soul's greatest defense against arrogance and the oppression of others. It is not possible to really believe in the God of all and do evil to the other.

And so more than being laws of the commonwealth, the Ten Commandments are laws of the heart; principles meant to shape a way of living, a lifestyle, an attitude of mind, a spirit of community, a people of God. They are intended to lead to the fullness of life, not simply to the well-ordered life. They speak to our heart and become the spiritual ground on which our lives rest. They become the path we walk on the journey toward wholeness, keeping our relationships honest, healthy and functioning as we hold one another accountable.

The day Jesus walked into the temple before that Passover, his life journey had been shaped by these laws 1200 years after they were given to the Hebrew people on a journey home. Jesus had learned them as a child, studied them as a rabbi and taught them in his ministry. They were written upon his heart.

When Jesus made a whip of cords and drove all of them out of the temple he was keeping his relationships honest, healthy and functioning by holding his community of faith accountable. Jesus was *challenging a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it was no longer open to a fresh revelation from God.* (Gail O'Day)

What began as a way for the Hebrew people to “glorify and enjoy God” in the burnt offerings and temple tax had become a means to an end for those with religious authority and a way to exploit not only God but also God’s children.

As we read this ancient, holy word, let us not do so in the spirit of arrogance and judgment. Rather, let us hold our community of faith accountable and ask the question: In what ways have we become so embedded in our rules and practices that we are no longer open to a fresh revelation from God. In what ways do we exploit God and our neighbors for our own purposes, diminishing and trivializing them.

These are important questions to ask on our journey toward Holy week. As we anticipate Christ’s death and resurrection, John reminds us with this poignant story that although God could not be contained in the laws and practices of the Jerusalem temple, God chose to dwell within the temple of Christ’s body.

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...and Christ became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. (Selected verses from Philippians 2)

After Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.’ He was speaking of the temple of his body. And they believed. (Selected verses from John 2)

Joan Chittister contends: As long as we think of God as only outside of ourselves rather than within us as well, we will never really be sure that God is the very air we breathe, the very heartbeat on which we are carried. Then we can forget God, miss God, overlook God, fail to find God. But when we know that God is all that keeps us alive, then we know God. For truly, “The finding of God is the coming to one’s own self.”

The laws of the heart are meant to lead us home, not only to our God but to ourselves as well. The laws of the heart give us balance, they give us hope...and remind us that the God who visited us in Christ, the God who is our traveling companion is the God who is there at the end of the journey, with a headlamp, calling out our name, waiting, supporting us in the struggle to grow up spiritually, bringing us home! Amen.