

Lent 3 "Remembering and the Ten Words" Mar. 7 2021 from Exodus 20 and John 2

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

This generation makes our excuses and justification to the point at which nothing is categorically wrong, except perhaps saying that something is wrong. The favorite phrase for a while was, "It's all good." In some circles the only sin remaining is judgmentalism. Our culture will tolerate anything but intolerance. And we don't even remember what that word actually means. We tolerate things we don't like in order to accomplish some greater good. But toleration does not imply embracing or celebrating or making it a basic tenet of our society.

Is that true among us as well? Has the vocabulary of sin, darkness, and death simply fallen out of our vocabulary, at least in a meaningful way? We all grieve over the tragedy of death, but do we call it evil? We may empathize with our neighbor going through the messy divorce, but do we call it sin? God does. Even the term "messy divorce" suggests that we have categorized it in a different place than sin. Is a neat divorce actually better or is it simply horrible in another way? What is our problem with calling divorce a sin? Have we put therapy ahead of God's Word?

Today, the readings confront us what seems to be heavy Law, the Ten Commandments and Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. The Holy One of Israel, Creator of All, lays down Law. Can we hear it, can we bear it? The Jesus whom we encounter in the Gospel is not all that nice today either. He binds cords together and makes a whip so that he may drive out the money changers from the temple of God. He will tip over the tables of the money changers. My mother was decidedly against me overturning tables, I recollect, and now that I am a parent, I can see why. It is not a nice thing to do at all. Jesus is attacking the livelihood of a lot of people. Paul Maier estimated that 20% of the population of Jerusalem made its money from the transactions and maintenance of the temple. Jesus' actions in the Gospel lesson today threaten people where they feel it, their wallets. This would be akin to denouncing tourism in Orange County.

John locates this story at the beginning of his Gospel, but the synoptic Gospels locate it on Palm Sunday or the Monday of Holy Week, implying that it precipitated Jesus' death. It will not be hard to fill the square outside of Pontius Pilate's palace with 500 or so angry Jews screaming for Jesus' death on Friday of that week. Their ability to feed their children was at stake in this Galilean rebel who had pointed out the fact that their livelihood was theologically problematic. Being nice has a very attractive reward, people rarely get angry at you, at least not violently so. Maybe we need to be glad Jesus was not nice. For without His death and resurrection for us we would all be doomed.

The Truth is that unless the cross of Christ can be applied to sin, then sin, despite all our ignoring it, does not go away. We might agree not to mention it, we might rename it, we might legalize it. but it still lurks out there, in there, in here, our hearts, condemning us.

The marvel of the Gospel is that even the enemy is always a potential friend. Remember Paul, the persecutor of Christians. There is no sin for which Jesus has not died, there is no guilt his blood cannot expunge, and no evil he has not conquered. That means we can confess it, we can receive forgiveness for it. For we have the solution; his name is Jesus.

Here's a delicious little irony for you: In the late 1600s, a Lutheran hymn writer by the name of Johann Hermann stumbled on a poem. He liked it a great deal and gently reworked it. Today you can sing it as "O Christ, our True and Only Light:"

"Fill with the radiance of your grace, the souls now lost in error's maze.

Enlighten those whose inmost minds, some dark delusion haunts and binds."

The collect today, "O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray," echoes the line about "Fill with the radiance of your grace, the souls now lost in error's maze." It is a favorite missional hymn of Lutherans and it beautifully portrays the Gospel reaching into the darkened minds of people straying in error's "maze and delusions."

I am sure that most Lutherans, when they hear such words, are thinking of some foreign person, perhaps a Hindu bowing in a distant temple, or perhaps someone closer to home, a member of their own congregation who has stopped going to church.

What makes this story interesting is that Hermann did not know the origin of this poem when he made a hymn of it. It was actually printed by an Austrian Jesuit several decades before Hermann came across it. As it was conceived by the author, the people walking in error's maze and needing Christ's light were the Lutherans themselves, not some foreigners.

The world around us chafes at the idea of a moral absolute. There is no right or wrong in the current culture of tolerance and relativism. There is no moral position on which one can stand to offer up a moral absolute. There is only my interpretation and your interpretation. We would never want to impose our morality on another and suppress the expression of their individual needs. We have outgrown such ideas. This is the 21st century and we have progressed past this. Or at least we like to think that we have.

Of course, such ideas also run headlong into the Word of God, the unchangeable truth which the Collect mentioned above. What does this say to us and to a world in which we live?

1. There are moral absolutes. We, the church, who are confronted with a culture which demands moral relativism need to hear this.
2. Is this not therapeutic. Certainly these commandments, if followed, will lead to a healthier and better life. But, this is a revelation of what God has in mind for us. Followed, they would keep us from the landmines of life which will maim and harm us. But this is third use of the Law. It is not the primary use of the Law. We can come up with all sorts of rational reasons to do this, but this is not what we preach.
3. These are commandments – they speak of the demands that God has, and to the fact that we have a father who expects something of us, and would not leave us in our sin. Silence would be the alternative, a deadly silence.
4. This is the listing of the basic stipulations of God's covenant with us. This is describing what we do now that by grace through faith we have God's favor, now that the covenant is established. They describe us under the cloak of Jesus' righteousness more than they prescribe behaviors for us.
5. As commandments, they are not unique, but their starting point is unique. They start by describing what God has done for us.

Every culture has rules like these, not every culture starts with God rescuing His people. This leads to the next point:

6. These commandments perfectly describe Jesus. Last week we heard that suffering is redefined for us – suffering makes us look a little like Jesus. Here again, we find Christ in an unsuspected spot. Any proclamation which ends with us completing or not completing these commandments misses the larger point of the Bible. The Law condemns us and describes Christ. The real law here may be that we imagine that this is all about us and our obedience.

The commandments need to be proclaimed and heard in the context of God’s great love for his creation. While it is true the Law serves to terrify the complacent conscience, the purpose of that terror is always the ensuing comfort.

In fact, the Ten Commandments are actually, in the Hebrew “Ten Words.” The Torah is pretty consistent in its labeling of this list: Ten Words. They are also repeated in Deuteronomy, which is why that is called the “second law.”

The gist of it is this. A careful reading reveals that there are really only nine commandments in here. You have to split one to make it ten. And since we all have heard about the Ten Commandments, we can hardly only offer up nine of them. Traditionally, the split came in the last commandment about coveting. In the 16th Century, when Zwingli threw out everything and decided to start over with a “fresh” reading of the Bible on which he would base a new Christianity, he elected to divide the first commandment into a proscription of other gods and a second proscription against graven images.

The dispute over the numbering seems to be intractable, at least if you are insistent on Ten Commandments. There are not actually ten commands. But there are Ten Words. The Hebrew “dabar” or word, is much more like Logos in Greek. It can mean concept, idea, or even a whole book. Most logically, I would think that that the first “Word” here is not a commandment at all, but the second verse of this chapter. “I am YHWH who brought you out of slavery in Egypt.” Not a commandment for us to do, but a statement of who God is. **That** is the first “word” of the ten: God is our rescuer, He is our savior, and our deliverer from death.

The other nine, which are expressed here as commandments, are actually the conclusions which one must draw from this fact. I will have no other Gods, I will use his name appropriately, etc.

As law, the commandments function terribly in our lives. They accuse us, they are a dreadful burden, a load we cannot carry. We, like Israel, need to hear the first Word: I am the God who came to you in human flesh, to die and rise again and lead you out of slavery to sin, death and the devil. Remember how these are the ten words and the first Word may in fact be the Word of salvation, making all subsequent words derivative from that first Word. And Jesus kept them all perfectly, you see. He is the fulfillment of the whole law.

“Remember” is a huge word in the Bible. In the Old Testament God remembers Noah in that ark and sends the wind to dry up the water. God remembers his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and calls Moses to bring them out of slavery. This all takes place at the time of the Passover when the Jews “remember” the Exodus. It is not an accident that the disciples “remember” this event after Jesus is raised. It is a very resurrection/Exodus thing to do.

In the Lord’s Supper, the Christian Passover, Jesus says “Do this for the remembrance of me.” The grammar actually can be read two ways, either we are remembering him or He is remembering us, or both. We hear the story and we remember – much as the Jews in the celebration of the Seder meal always tell the story with the words “When we were in Egypt.” It is not “when our fathers were in Egypt...” but always they become the first generation of people, the very people who walked out through the red sea.

And so it should be with us. It’s not when Jesus came 2000 years ago to Jerusalem. It is today, when we were bound in darkness and God came to us in human flesh, to die and rise again and lead us out of slavery to sin, death and the devil.

Jesus is our Rock and our Salvation. He is the Lamp unto our feet and the Light onto our path. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He fulfilled the Law on our behalf, poured out his love upon us by his blood on the cross and opened the gates of paradise for us to enter. It is finished. Now we respond.

Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank and praise your glorious name for your mercy and grace. Abide in us to life everlasting. Amen!