

October 8, 2023
Pentecost 19– Proper 22A
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalms 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The continuing story of the Children of Israel in the wilderness is a story of “already but not yet.” They were no longer in Egypt, but not yet in the promised land. They were not eating Egyptian food, but not yet feeding themselves, surviving on water, quail, and manna. They were no longer forcibly subjected to Egyptian laws but did not yet have laws of their own. They were longer enslaved, but not yet sure exactly what freedom looked like.

During this uncertain, murky time, God gives the people a gift: ten laws. In his book *Journey to the Common Good*,¹ Walter Brueggemann summarizes the heart of the commandments’ teachings this way: commandments 1-3, love and trust the Lord, “rather than Pharaoh’s security system”; commandment 4, embrace sabbath rest as “an alternative to aggressive anxiety”; commandments 5-9, recognize that “neighbors, all kinds of neighbors, are to be respected and protected and not exploited”; and commandment 10 “limit . . . acquisitiveness,” particularly practices “that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones”. This is how God teaches the community of faith to live together.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the Law as a particular treasure for a people on their way to a new life. She writes, “God’s covenant with their grandfather Abraham had three shining jewels in it: descendants as plentiful as the stars in the sky, a special relationship to God, and a land of milk and honey all their own. But something was still missing, something Moses went up the mountain to get.”²

Hmm, we wonder. Was anything really missing? That promise with three jewels sounded pretty good all on its own. Using the metaphor of a tent (a good metaphor for

¹ Westminster John Knox Press, 2010 & 2021.

² Taylor, “Peculiar Treasures.”

people in the wilderness!) Taylor explains that "a promise without law is like a tent without tent poles."

Over time, the law would shape the life and identity of the people of God. Taylor imagines God saying, "Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness...Guard your life together. Guard your life with me."

If we see the law as "the lovingly drawn boundaries of a Creator bent on reminding creatures of their size," then we might be freed from thinking that we have to earn God's love. If God expresses God's love in the gift of the law, is it possible to experience obedience as a loving response to all that God has already done?

Is this how you and I look at the Ten Commandments? I think we tend to view them as a marker for a certain sort of conservative religiosity. Or, a finger-shaking guide about what not to do. A checklist that is relegated to use in Lent, if at all. But gift? Not so much.

Where does the checklist view of the law get us, anyway? This morning we hear Paul telling the Philippians, "No one is more Jewish than I am." He was from the elite tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, etc., etc., and so forth. If anyone would benefit from meticulously following the Law, it would have been Paul. He goes so far as to claim that, under the Law, he is blameless!

But then Paul goes on. *Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.* All the things that he loses, he now regards as *rubbish*, or as the King James Version puts it, *of dung*. The hymn writer Isaac Watts says, "my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."³

This is Paul's articulation of grace, God's free and unfettered gift to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our efforts on our own behalf fall short, even if we are blameless under the Law.

The Collect from the Third Sunday in Lent reminds us that "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves." The Law cannot bridge the gap from us to God – only Grace can. Ideally, then, our life in God isn't just about commandments. It is, though, about relationships. We are called to love God, neighbor, and self – all three.

The commandments are like rules of grammar in the language of relationship. Rules of grammar allow us to understand each other – sort of. Funny thing about rules. We often chafe against them, finding them limited and rigid. Imagine for a moment, a world where human languages had no grammar. For those of you who text, you know

³ Isaac Watts, *When I survey the wondrous cross* (1707).

that a no-grammar language is already here. Does LOL stand for laughing out loud, or lots of love? Misunderstandings abound.

This past Wednesday, we commemorated the Feast of Francis of Assisi. This morning, because we're thinking about relationships, I want to recall two episodes from Francis' life: lepers and a wolf.

Returning from the horrors of war, the wealthy but unhappy Francis renounced his privilege and shed his fine clothes. That was an outward sign of his conversion. But Francis considered the opportunity to live with and serve a local community of lepers to be his real conversion. By seeing the lepers as human beings, not as rubbish to be fled from in horror, his perceptions, his life, changed.

The soul-wounded ex-soldier sensed himself, by God's grace and through no power of his own, remade into a different man. Just as suddenly, the sins which had been tormenting him seemed to melt away. Grace upon grace.

The other story is about a hungry old wolf who had been terrifying the people of Gubbio and preying on their livestock. Francis went out to meet the wolf armed only with love. The townspeople were sure the wolf would eat Francis. But Francis considered the needs of both the wolf and the community.

He realized that the wolf was too old to hunt wild animals and just needed to eat, while the people needed safety for themselves and their animals. So, Francis proposed that the wolf be fed daily, and the wolf agreed to leave Gubbio's sheep and chickens alone.

What is extraordinary in the story of the wolf of Gubbio is not that the wolf grew tame, but that the people of Gubbio grew tame. They ran to meet the cold and hungry wolf not with pruning knives and hatchets but with bread and hot porridge. Their relationship changed because, by grace, they discovered that all creation is one.

And we look to Richard Rohr, the Franciscan theologian, to bring the lesson home. "Isn't it wonderful news ... that we come to God not by our perfection but by our imperfection? That gives all of us an equal chance, and utterly levels the human playing field. No pretending or denying is helpful any longer. Deep within each of us lives both a leper and a wolf; and we're ashamed and afraid of both. In Franciscan lore, they are our inner imperfections."

"Francis embraced the leper ... [and] tamed the wolf. The stories did happen historically, but first of all they must have happened in his soul. Our inner life, our emotional life, our prayer life, is where we first do our battles, and then we are prepared for the conflicts of our outer life.

It is on the inside of us those lepers and wolves first live. If we haven't been able to kiss many lepers, if we haven't been able to tame many wolves in the outer world, it's probably because we haven't first made friends with our own inner leprosy and the ferocious wolf within each of us. They are always there in some form, waiting to be tamed and needing to be forgiven.⁴

We, like the Children of Israel, live in a murky, uncertain time. We, like the early Church, live in a season of "already but not yet." We are surrounded by a world of finger pointing and checklists. Nevertheless, our call as God's people is to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our call as followers of Jesus is to work towards a community whose grammar is grace.

I wonder if our first relationship work, then, might start close to home – to name the poor leper within, to nurse and tend her wounds. And to name our inner wolf; and tame him by gentle forgiveness. Then, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, may we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

⁴ Richard Rohr, Adapted from *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, p. 276, day 287.