

Lent 3B
Peace, Seattle
March 4, 2018
Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Cor 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

COVENANT OF RELATIONSHIP

The first lessons during this Lenten season focus on the COVENANTS God initiates in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first of those covenants, in week one, came after the GREAT FLOOD:

“As for me,” God tells Noah, “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendents and with every living creature, that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

This is the sign I make: I have set my bow in the clouds and when it see it, I will remember the everlasting covenant I have made between myself and every living creature on the earth.”¹

The second covenant, which we heard about last week, is God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah, which appears first in Genesis 12 and is reiterated several times, including in chapter 17:

“This is my covenant with you,” says the Lord. “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. As for Sarai your wife, she shall be called Sarah. And I will bless her and give you a son by her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”²

This week’s covenant takes place at Mount Sinai—the Ten Words or Ten Commandments—the core curriculum of God’s Torah or teaching.

TORAH literally means “the finger pointing way.” And these 10 words point to the way God wants the covenant people to live. There isn’t a lot of theological fine print here, just God using very basic language to lay down boundaries clearly and directly.

We have a growing number of young ones here at Peace. Parents, when you take your kids to the playground, what do you notice about how they explore the space there? For many young children, when there’s no fence around the play area, they tend to stay closer; but with a fence marking the boundaries, children often feel freer to explore all parts and corners of the playground.

In Exodus God gathers the Hebrew children, liberated from slavery, and like a caring parent gives them a FENCE, a FRAME, a set of BOUNDARIES, in which to live; a WAY TO THRIVE with their newly won freedom; a COVENANT for honorable relationship with God and each other.

The point is: strong boundaries actually provide us with a firmer foundation for freedom.

These 10 commands also function as a kind of mirror: they help us see ourselves honestly and truthfully. So much so that Brother Martin suggested they be used as preparation for confession of sin.

He knew from his own experience how we’re endlessly on the lookout for loopholes in God’s will. But when we use the commandments as a mirror to reflect our thoughts, words, and deeds back to us, then our need for Christ’s forgiving and saving presence quickly comes into focus.

Luther called this the theological use of the law. The LAW is that mirror which, when held up to us, shows us our sin, and sends us back to Christ, in whom we find forgiveness and the grace of beginning again.

¹ Genesis 9:8f, edited.

² Genesis 17:1-16, edited.

But perhaps the most important thing to remember about these Ten Commandments is that they don't make any sense outside of a relationship with the Lord. The opening verse sets the stage and tone for everything that follows:

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.

This opening sentence accomplishes several things. First, it keeps the commandments oriented personally: “I am the Lord your God...” (the “you” is singular!) Following these commands is predicated on having a relationship with God. These are words given to you by your God as gift—a gift from the very one who has redeemed you.³

This opening word also reminds us what God has already done for us. That our God is a God who meets us in the wilderness of our captivity—be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or whatever—and promises us to stay by our side no matter how difficult the journey may be.

Finally, while it's clear God wants the commandments to shape the life we share, there are no specific consequences listed for if or when we disobey them. What this tells us is that God is less interested in punishing us than in guiding us toward sustainable ways of being in community.

Every family has a way of setting boundaries at home—let's call them FAMILY RULES. When you're a kid, those rules are so ubiquitous that you may not be able to articulate them—it's just the WAY THINGS ARE. It's when kids are old enough to go to a friend's house that they come face to face with a different set of rules, that their own family's rules begin to stand out more clearly.

My mother ran a tight ship growing up, with firm boundaries. Consequently you always knew where you stood. You knew what was allowed and what was not allowed. 50+ years after the fact, I still remember the huge contrast between how my home was run and how friend Raymond's home was run.

Raymond's mom was a chain smoker and had a drinking problem, and their house looked and smelled different because of this. It lacked the order of my own.

Now sometimes, that was OK with me, like when my brother Peter and I joined Raymond and his brother Roddy in their living room, taking firecrackers apart and combining the gunpowder with an eye toward manufacturing our own bigger and better and more powerful little firecracker bombs.

We'd never get away with this in OUR house, but nobody in Raymond's home batted an eye.

There were other times that I wasn't so sure about the lack of order. I remember my first sleepover at Raymond's house. We slept downstairs in the basement, where dried globs of once-milky Cheerios littering the carpeted floor.

We watched television late into the night—a no-no at my home—and it was Raymond's brother Roddy, not his mother, who called the shots. It was a learning adventure—like going to another country—but I breathed a sigh of relief when I got back to my own home the next morning.

The truth is, as any traveler knows, you learn much more about your own values when you have the opportunity to experience the values of others.

³ Terry Fretheim, Working Preacher.

As God worked to form the community and faith life of Israel, God had to call on them to leave the values they'd learned under Pharaoh's empire behind, and to re-learn what it meant to live responsibly in community.

Notice: the commandment that gets the most press/detail is remembering the Sabbath. Working as slave labor in the thumb of the Egyptian empire, Hebrew people had no day off, no down time. Egypt taught them that people are commodities 24/7.

When they left Egypt they had to re-learn that they were NOT commodities; that there was a day given over to NOT working, not producing, but simply BEING—which was God's design from the beginning. In today's 24/7 culture, this may be the most radical commandment of all.

It seems to me that the whole American experiment is one in which the boundaries of freedom have swung back and forth between two poles: individual freedom and collective responsibility, on a never ending quest for that sweet spot. The prominent conversations going on in our culture right now can all be distilled down to that quest for the right balance.

The question, as old as Cain and Abel, remains as relevant for us as it ever was:

AM I MY BROTHER'S, MY SISTER'S, KEEPER?

The Bible's grand story—the great ARC that runs from Creation to Covenant to Exile to New Covenant to Cross and Resurrection—makes it clear that how we behave with respect to God and our neighbor, how we treat someone—whether they're part of our tribe or not—matters to God; and it ought to matter to us.

When we hear what Jesus has to say in the gospels it becomes clear that, rather than throwing out the 10 commands, he calls Israel—and us—into a relationship with God that goes deeper.

When Jesus walks into the Temple courts in today's gospel he sees first hand how the living spiritual core of Israel's relationship with God has been replaced with an economic system that takes advantage of people, and makes relationship with God a secondary concern.

Jesus went seeking a sacred place, but what he found was a market place, a system that interposed itself between the people and the God they came to worship. And when Jesus saw this, he became outraged...

He made a whip and he literally drove them out. When he was questioned his reply pointed toward the de-construction and re-construction that God was going to bring about through him.

STANDING AGAINST EXISTING SYSTEMS IS NEVER EASY. From the outside, it often looks like a fools errand. Paul says that the message about the cross—this emblem of torture, failure, condemnation, and shame—this message is pure “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Christ's own apprentices—his closest inner circle—didn't grasp what he had been saying to them about the necessity of his suffering and death until AFTER he had been raised.

When there's an enormous buffet of religious choices available, why choose the cross? Because as ironic and paradoxical as it sounds, the cross is the only path toward a true healing of human community.

At the cross all systems for defining and controlling our destiny come to an end.

At the cross all our efforts to find God cease.

At the cross every human approach to the divine is shown to be a dead end road.

All our attempts to engineer our own salvation end at the cross, and we find ourselves emptied of everything but a longing for healing.

Violence in our schools and in our streets; the growing disparity between rich and poor; civil wars and refugee crises; climate breakdown on a global scale—each of these functions as a powerful mirror, exposing our divisions and addictions and indicting us for our failures.

Without Christ's self-emptying love, the only God we'd be left with is a God of judgment who says, "You've screwed up royally and now it's payback time."

But in Jesus, in his self-giving sacrifice on the cross for your sake and for mine and for all the world, we see the true face of God: the face of compassionate, forgiving, and unconditional love.

Not a soft love that fails to stand up for the right or to challenge the wrong;

Not a love that fails to set boundaries, or that looks the other way;

But a love that goes the distance. A love which, as St. Paul will say later in his letter, never fails.

This is the kind of love, this is the kind of relationship that we need, that the world needs, and this is the very love with which God meets us in the Ten Commands, and at font and table.

Amen.