

Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 6:4-9, October 8, 2023
The Ten Commandments for Today

Last week's story of God's command to Moses to lead the Israelites from Egypt jumps forty years forward to a moment just before Moses' death and the entrance of the Israelites into the promised land. The action pauses here, while Moses instructs the people, once again, reminding them of all that their parents were commanded at Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai immediately after they left Egypt. So, then what would be the major theme of Moses' life? The burning bush? The parting of the Red Sea? The forty years in the wilderness? Not being able to actually enter the Promised Land?

What would be the most defining moment in Moses' life? Without a doubt, it would be the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. There on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the Ten Moral Principles for all human civilization for all time and history, the moral map for human society. Mount Sinai, and God giving him the Ten Commandments, was the most defining moment in Moses' life.

This moral map or Ten Principles for human civilization are found in all cultures of the world, in all generations of the world, in all centuries of the world. Scholars have called these Ten Moral Laws, the Tao. Every society has similar moral laws that protect language, family, sexuality, property, reputation, etc.

Every century, generation, and society applies these Ten Moral Laws differently to their particular time in history. Every century,

generation and society needs to interpret these Ten Commandments afresh, in new ways that face new situations. We find such differences of application in the Scriptures themselves. How many basic commandments are there? Ten? It depends on how you count. We have three recitations of the basic commandments in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. But in two of these, we do not have ten commandments but twelve. Not all mention the commandment about making no graven images.

After roaming through the wilderness, Moses and the Israelites come to Mount Sinai/Hebron, the mountain of God. After a period of consecration, YHWH came down onto the mountain in fire and thunder, and gave the people the beginning of the Law in Ten Commandments, and covenants with them to be a holy nation. God then invited them onto the mountain to hear the rest of the Law, but the people were afraid, and sent Moses onto the mountain for forty days and nights to hear the Law.

While waiting for Moses, they got bored and broke some of the commandments. They made a graven image of God in a golden calf idol. God once again made a covenant to be with and for these people, despite their sinfulness. So they built a dwelling place for God, a Tabernacle which held the Ark of the Covenant so that God could dwell among God's people as they continued on to the Promised Land.

Despite the mighty Acts of God against the Pharaoh, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, they still didn't trust that God would bring them to the Promised land. For their disbelief and for their repeated

rebellions, God vowed that that first generation would not enter the land. So, they wandered in the wilderness until that first generation died off. Their children, the second generation, came to the edge of the Promised Land, where Moses began preaching. His sermons make up the bulk of the Book of Deuteronomy.

Moses began by reciting the Law for the second time (deutero- two, nomos-law). He had been leading these people for some forty years in the wilderness, and had heard them complain about every little thing. The generation of those who came out of Egypt was gone except for Moses and Joshua. Moses himself would not enter into the Promised Land.

Moses' followers, had been taught the Law, even agreed to it, and yet broke it at every opportunity. He is a burnt out leader who deeply cares for his people, but has grown weary of their inability to respond appropriately. So he gathered them together for the last time to hear the Law. He wanted to impart wisdom to a new generation as well as reinterpret the Law for a people who would be settling in a land as opposed to wandering in the wilderness, a reinterpretation for a new context.

Moses reminded the people of the covenant at Horeb, but brought its relevance to the present. According to the narrative context, these were not the people who were at Horeb. Some of them might have been alive at the time, but would have been children at the time and did not understand the implications of what had happened. Many of them had lived their entire lives wandering in the wilderness. Yet Moses insists that YHWH made the covenant "with

us”.

The law is not confined to that second generation of Israelites standing on the edge of the Promised Land. It speaks also to the generations who live in the land, and to the generations who, in exile and in diaspora, are outside the land again. Each generation is called upon to enter into the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai.

Deuteronomy seems to have been written by and for those who were living hundreds of years later. This magnifies the following statement. “It was not with your ancestors that YHWH was making covenant, but with you yourselves.” This was what led to the Jewish understanding that every Jewish soul was present at Sinai/Horeb, and each Jewish person considered themselves to have made a covenant with YHWH there, no matter when they were born.

In Deuteronomy, in this second teaching, Moses repeated many of the laws that had been given previously in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. However, many of them were modified and reinterpreted. Within the narrative context, this is a new teaching of the Law from being one for a nomadic people, to being one for a people who are settled in the land. In this, Moses was modelling a view of the Law which was indeed Torah, that is instruction for the people. This is wisdom lived out, not through frozen and dead recitation, but through active living. This was law with and for the people and their needs. In a later chapter, Moses suggested that such a telling or reading of the law should be done every seven years and perhaps implying that reinterpretation should also be a part of it.

The Jewish people have a rich history of interpretation and reinterpretation of the Torah. The Mishna, Talmud, and continued works are a record of this conversation within Judaism. The works of the Christian New Testament bear witness to the early church, mostly from the Jewish context, making sense of the Jewish scriptures in light of Jesus. Deuteronomy was already a reinterpretation of the earlier Levitical law, in light of the rise and fall of the monarchy, and fall of the nation of Israel.

We are always in the process of reinterpreting the law, negotiating with the text. The life of faith is like a tree planted by living waters, always drawing from the well of God's wisdom. We are to be people who bring out treasures, both new and old, and see how they might apply to our current contexts. Living by the Ten Commandments or Moral Laws, ritual and remembrance all play a significant role in the life of the community, as do prayers. The prayers as said in the new community of Israelites were no exception, and so Moses continues to teach them.

The final verses read today include the shema: "Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone." This phrase was spoken aloud, while the rest of the prayer was traditionally said in silence amidst the community. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. This was not a prayer to be said half-heartedly. Indeed it called the community not only to a personal, intimate and trusting, covenantal relationship with God and with each other. It required a total commitment; a loving with our whole being – mind, body and spirit. A love that would move people to do and to act as well as to feel – a love all encompassing.

"You shall love..." It seems the prayer is stating the obvious, yet there are times in our own journeys of faith when being called to love – genuinely love – can make us feel rather clueless. Perhaps this is because we cannot get there on our own, not by burying ourselves in theological books nor by trying to stay in our heads. What do we know about love? Not much, only what we have experienced through our grandparents, our parents, our family and friends and our communities of faith. It's as if we are constantly reminded, as were the Hebrew people before us, that God sends other people from the community to us to remind us not only that we are loved, but are called out of ourselves to love.

The children, the young people, were to remember the past and to bring the past afresh into the present, creating a memory for the generations that would follow. Along with loving with their whole being and passing on their experiences to their children and their children's children, the community was to bind God's words on their hand and forehead - as a sign and symbol of their faithfulness. God's faithfulness. The tefilin, boxes containing scripture, were placed on the arm facing the heart and on the forehead and attached with leather straps, while the mezuzah, a box containing scrolls inside, was placed on the door posts so that the people would stop, observe and kiss it as they entered into the house, reiterating the importance of their ritual.

The equivalent for the modern world could be to write them everywhere - refrigerators, framed art, email signatures, letters, texts, and posts to help us remember, be obedient and grateful. These things will keep us faithful to our God and our people. They

will keep us from idolatry, which can also be defined as forgetting, complaining, and faithlessness.

What will we leave our children and our children's children? What from the past needs to be brought anew into the present by our children, creating the memories, if not the hope, for the generations to come. For we are called to remember. Ritual and sacrament play an important role in our lives and faith. The rituals and sacraments of our faith shape and form a people, and more specifically, rituals and sacraments "particularize", or set a community of faith apart from the general culture. How often are our own journeys of faith greatly blessed and sometimes radically changed by a deeper awareness and appreciation for that which is brought forward as a gift to the people?

As we move to the New Testament, we see how Jesus handles the Ten Commandments. In the first five books of the Bible, called the Law or Torah, there are more than 600 laws, rules and regulations for human society. But Jesus seems to ignore all of these 600 laws, rules and regulations. Instead, we find Jesus highlighting two laws in a special and sacred way. Jesus said that there were only two commandments and the whole Old Testament rested on these two commandments. Without doing these two sacred commandments, the whole Old Testament was worthless.

Jesus invites us to love God, who is the source of all life. And we are invited to love God, not just a little bit, but with all our heart, soul, and mind. For Jesus, this is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it for Jesus. Jesus quotes from Leviticus:

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” That is, just as you look after your own self interest and life, so you are to work for the benefit of your neighbour as you would work for the benefit of your own life. Jesus said, “Do these, and you shall live. Do these, and you will understand what it means to find life. Happiness in life consists of loving both God and your fellow human beings.”

In an agrarian society, when there is really very little cultural change from generation to generation, this passing on might be a simple copy of the things that have been passed on. However, when there are great changes, there is an opportunity to apply afresh the wisdom of the law.

The given context of the liminal space between a nomadic peoples and a conquering/agrarian people is a shift in culture, which needs reinterpretation. The suggested time when this was written was during great political turmoil and the threat of imperial capture. The form that we have, not only of Deuteronomy, but of all the Hebrew Scriptures, likely happened during the second temple period when the people had come back to the land after exile in Babylon, and were re-evaluating their covenantal life.

Jesus came to complete the law, and to reinterpret it for his disciples under the Roman occupation, just on the cusp of the destruction of the temple. This message and law would be re-evaluated and reinterpreted over and over in the centuries ahead, after Constantine made Christianity the official Roman religion, the fall of the Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and so on.

Today, technological changes have accelerated the cultural changes that we are seeing from generation to generation, which further necessitates this call to pass on, but also to discuss, what we have learned. As we have these conversations between the generations, we have the opportunity to learn afresh the wisdom of these commandments.

As with any cross-cultural translation, it causes us to refine and re-evaluate what must remain the same, and what needs to be changed. We face the exodus of younger generations in the church precisely because many times their perspectives and wisdom are not valued. Older generations tend to think that this transmission and learning should only be one way, and undervalue the discussion and re-evaluation that should come with it. Younger people have understood the wisdom of God and applied it to their context. But, too often they find an institution that is not willing to do the same, one which is overly committed to extra-gospel commitments to the exclusion of others.

Listen, people of Grace, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength. Also, love your neighbour as yourself. Talk about these things, tell them and reinterpret them over and over, when you are at home and when you are away. Bind them on your head and on your hand, put them on your doors. Learn from your elders and from your children. Learn from those who look and think and act and love like you, and from those who don't look or think or act or love like you. See this torah, this instruction, from other people's eyes, and always be searching for the truth. **Amen.**

PRAYERS FOR PENTECOST 19 OCTOBER 8, 2023

Let us offer our prayers to God for the life of the world and for all God's people in their daily life and work. Creator God, the beginning and end of all things, in your providence and care you watch unceasingly over all Creation. We offer our prayers, that in us and in all your people, your will may be done according to your wise and loving design and purpose revealed in Christ our Lord. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We thank You, O God, for everything we delight in – warm sunshine in autumn days, the splendour of colours and beauty in nature and art; the rhythm and sounds enjoyed in poetry and music; for the diversity, creativity and ingenuity of human achievements; for finding meaning and purpose to our daily lives; for celebrating milestones; for the gift of being known and appreciated through the love and friendship of family and friends; for all you provide to support body, mind, and soul. Blessings upon blessings you so generously shower upon us! **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

On this Thanksgiving weekend we also remember those in our own community and around the world who are less fortunate than ourselves. We pray for those who do not know when their next meal will be; for those who cannot support themselves or their loved ones with sufficient food or the essentials of daily living; those who are far from home, those who are estranged from family; those who are homebound, in hospital or long-term care; those who are unhoused or living in insecure housing situations; those who are lonely or forgotten. Surround them with your loving presence and provide them with all they need. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We pray for all through whom we receive sustenance and life; for the soil, land and waters that support food production; for farmers and agricultural workers, for packers, distributors and company boards; for people around the world whose livelihood is dependent on fairtrade practices; for the bounty and abundance of food choices available to

us from all corners of the globe. By the grace of your Spirit, touch our hearts and the hearts of all who live in comfortable plenty, and make us wise stewards of your gifts. We offer ourselves to your service, asking that by the Spirit at work in us others may receive a rich harvest of love and joy and peace. As you have so ordered our lives that we are dependent upon each other, so enable us by your grace to seek the well-being of others before our own. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We pray for all engaged in research to safeguard crops against disease and to promote food production methods that support the sustainability and health of the ecosystem. May new breakthroughs be found for cures to diseases like malaria brought on by contaminated waters, respiratory illnesses aggravated by smog and pollutants in the air, and illnesses caused by malnourishment. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We pray for governments and aid agencies, including Canadian Lutheran World Relief, in those areas of the world where there is disaster, drought, flooding, and starvation. We give thanks for the many NGO's whose ongoing emergency response, relief and community redevelopment work is making a difference to support life and provide economic improvements among those who hunger and whose lives are at risk. Prosper the work of their hands and the searching of their minds, that their labour may be for the welfare of all. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We give you thanks Almighty God for supplying most of us with fresh, drinkable water. We pray that all peoples in our country would receive access to fresh water soon, especially those communities who have been waiting far too long for this. Have mercy on those who are suffering drought or communities living with disruptions to infrastructures that supply clean water that have occurred because of flooding or fires. Help us in Canada to care for and manage our water resources wisely. Lord in your mercy: hear our prayer. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We pray for the peoples of Palestine and Israel living through weapons of destruction fired on them, their homes and communities by warring factions on both sides of the wall that divides them. We mourn the bloodshed and loss of lives, the destruction of buildings, the disruption to daily living that is already so challenging. We pray for peacekeeping efforts and continued talks that will lead to long sought-after peace. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are known to us who are in need of your healing and compassionate care. We pray those who are ill, recovering from surgery, or are awaiting surgery. We pray for all who care for them. Give skill, compassion and understanding to all who work for their well-being. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

We remember those who have died, whom we entrust to your eternal love in the hope of resurrection to new life. **God of abundance: hear our prayer.**

God of grace, as you are ever at work in your Creation, so fulfill your wise and loving purpose in us and in all for whom we pray, that with them, and in all that you have made, your glory may be revealed and the whole earth give praise to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**