

Exodus 20:1-17 + I Corinthians 1:18-25

Lent 3 March 4, 2018

the covenant and the cross

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Reading our Lenten devotional last week, I enjoyed our third and fourth graders comments about the Ten Commandments. They reminded me that our forebears in the Presbyterian tradition used to recite the Ten Commandments during worship in response to the declaration of pardon for their sin. That may seem strange for a community that puts so much emphasis on **grace** - the unmerited and undeserved favor of God- to remember the commandments. After all, John Calvin was emphatic that there is nothing in the human condition or anything in human behavior that **earns** the favor of God. The Christian life is not the equivalent of scouts earning merit badges for virtuous behavior. Reinhold Niebuhr, commenting on our proclivity to mess things up, famously said the only Christian doctrine for which we have empirical evidence is sin.

As Saint Paul put it: all of us have fallen short of the glory of God. And, in case you were wondering if you are the exception, Paul really means everyone; humanity has fallen short of the glory of God. Anne Lamott, who embodies the Presbyterian perspective with more humor than anyone I know, said: **my mind is a dark alley; I try not to go into it alone.**

One thing is clear: there is nothing that you can do to light your own way, mend your own wounds or provide your own wholeness. Nothing. Christianity is so radical in its prescription that most of us find a way to adjust it to fit our plans, which always means attempts to fix ourselves. They always fail. Because anything that fits into your brilliant plan will be less that God's infinitely wonderful desire to mend your wounds and make you whole. It's called Grace - and there is nothing you or I can do to earn it or merit it: not by our virtue, or some presumed innate goodness.

In the eternal *desire* of God, humanity receives favor through the most shocking way possible. **God is crucified for us** in Jesus Christ; taking upon himself the full force of human evil. God did this for the sole purpose of healing creation and mending the wound of our separation from Love. What's more astonishing, there is nothing you can do but receive the *medicine of the cross* and rejoice in God's love for you. No payback. This is the heart of Christianity. It is more radical than any can imagine; and it is all the doing of God.

Saint Paul pushes us even further. The way in which the world will be healed is through the cross of Jesus who receives all the sin of the world upon him. Is it any wonder this is called *foolish* by one *and scandalous* by the other? Yet those who have the eyes of faith perceive the beauty of God in the cross of Christ. This is our salvation.

In the strange way of God, what appears wildly foolish is deeply wise; what appears as utter weakness is remarkably strong. Once you begin to perceive what this Gracious God is about, your true freedom begins. Because after all what is more freeing than to know that you are loved eternally and that there is nothing you must do, nor anything you can do to earn such acceptance? The sheer foolishness of God makes your heart sing. That's grace.

So then why on earth would our forebears drenched in grace, recite the Ten Commandments every Sunday as a response to the gift of forgiveness?

Imagine you have received a gift. There is nothing you can do to repay it. Every attempt to replace gift with gift reduces it to some crass utilitarian exchange. But still something wells up within you; some response starts to emerge. You can feel it. Others can see it on your face. It's called gratitude. Once you've got it, you share it.

John Calvin said gratitude is the expression that most fits our response to God. For Calvin the law, including the 10 commandments was God's **gift** given to form a people into a covenant community of mercy governed by God. The Ten Commandments are not just restraints, like a moral prison yard, or a cattle prod reminding you where you cannot go. The writer Barbara Brown Taylor calls them *Ten Teachings for a Whole Life*. They express gratitude. They summons us to Sabbath rest. They honor God in all our relations. They remind us that form without freedom is oppression and freedom with form is chaos. Every community needs some form, a moral pattern of rules to guide them. When Saint Paul said you have been set free by grace, it wasn't just for self-indulgence. There is a form to our freedom. He called it the law of love.

Love is the form of our freedom. We express it in **social** practices. We refuse to violate our neighbor's integrity; not taking what belongs to another. We honor our parents. We respect our vows by shunning adultery. We bless the Sabbath and take a rest. We never steal nor murder. We give allegiance to God alone, whose name is sacred and we never use it in vain. (Not even OMG)

Law and grace; the cross and covenant: they actually do belong together in a life formed by gratitude and praise. Come to the Table of Grace!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.