

Lent 3, 3/15/09, All Saints Episcopal, E.L.
“Guidance for the Freed Life” Exodus 20:1-17

When I was an adolescent growing up in the Lutheran tradition within the Christian church, I entered confirmation training. We studied “The Small Catechism,” written by Martin Luther.

A significant goal was memorizing the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and their meanings, along with learning the meaning of the sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

This catechetical method of learning presented a series of questions and answers. So, for example, the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.” (1)

The focus centered on each confirmand (as we were called) applying the commandments to our individual lives, coming to know what each one meant for daily living. We were a group of young people, gathered in community, a microcosm of a larger community, our church, to which we belonged.

Yet each of us, it seemed, was responsible singularly, to come to understand what it meant to be a Christian follower, accountable alone for our faith and obedience as a Christian.

I vividly recall experiencing a severe difficulty in memorizing a part of the catechism. I just could not get it and grew more frustrated and upset as I tried over and over to repeat from memory, finally ending up in tears.

My mother comforted me but still I felt the burden, the obligation. It was all heavily dependent on me, rather than within the context of the support and comfort of my family, classmates, congregation, and the whole historic community of faith into which we were baptized.

I do not mean to be overly negative about this adolescent training in the faith. Yet upon reflection, I sense the emphasis leaned heavily on individual commitment and less on understanding ourselves as part of a community of young believers in a universal community, the body of Christ, the one holy, catholic, apostolic church.

The Ten Commandments originated as part of a covenant given to a community centuries ago. They are best understood and lived within a community that supports and helps all to live in freedom with love and forgiveness, justice and peace for all.

The event at Sinai is the third covenant we hear about during this Lenten season. Two weeks ago we learned of the covenant with Noah and his small community of family after the devastating flood with the sign of a rainbow reminding the faithful of God's promise never to destroy the earth and all its inhabitants, animals and humans.

Last week we heard about the covenant God made with Abram and Sarai, given new names of Abraham and Sarah, with the promise that this nearly 100 year old couple would bear a son --a birth that would initiate a community with a line of descendants making up a multitude of nations.

This morning the covenant establishes God as Sovereign Lord of a community of slaves, oppressed, beaten down, with a lost identity, no life of their own, no hope, nothing to look forward to except another day of slavery. This community the Lord God brought to freedom.

God promises always to be their God and gives them a way to remain freed ---a road map for living together in peace and harmony, justice and freedom, with respect for self and others, with trust and integrity, supporting and caring for each other. That way was embodied in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments.

The problem arises in the way the commandments have been misunderstood and misused. Often they have been regarded as restrictive rules, restraining fences, ways for keeping people on the straight and narrow.

The commandments also have been applied as a personal morality compact between God and me, separating the "I" from the others. As long as I live the moral life, that is all that matters. Others must fend for themselves.

In this view, the obedient are separated from the disobedient, good folk from bad folk, the righteous from the unrighteous; and in some religious viewpoints, the disobedient are condemned to hell.

Rather than understanding all of us as bound together in community -- - caring for, encouraging, forgiving, uplifting one another --- each person's spiritual destiny is understood as dependent on that individual herself or himself. Such an understanding might overwhelm anyone of us with a burden of guilt too heavy to bear alone.

However, there is another way with the Decalogue. George Forell, former professor at the University of Iowa, once called the Ten Commandments "laws for free people." He emphasized that we need rule and law to maintain freedom. As he put it: "Rules telling us to keep silent in the library give everybody freedom to read undisturbed." (2).

Likewise, laws protecting people against discrimination on any grounds enhance the freedom of everyone in society to live in freedom without fear of oppression and damning degradation.

Dr. Forell suggested that the Ten Commandments should not be read as a legal text but as "God's address to God's people." He explained, "If we read them in this manner, we shall soon learn they are not barriers keeping us from living full and satisfying lives, but rather roads enabling us to travel as free men and women." (3)

So just laws and rules do not take away freedom but ensure that freedom is enjoyed by all. The commandments are not detailed rules for living, but a set of ethical and moral principles: a design for people to live together in freedom and justice.

Significant it is that the commandments were given after the rescue from slavery, not before. The gracious action of God came first. The preface to the commandments stands as a reminder of this gracious act: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

The life of faith always is founded upon God's acts of grace. For you and me, that act is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's rescuing of us from captivity to sin and captivity to the power of death.

Our commitment to live faithfully with God flows out of God's commitment to be faithful to us. God has fashioned a relationship of grace that creates and welcomes us into a community that lives within this gracious relationship.

This is the bottom line. We are a community ---a religious community, yes, but also we are part of a human community that spans the globe and includes a multitude of nations, cultures and races.

Being mindful of our belonging within this human community, we bring values expressed in the Sinai Covenant to the role we play with people of our humanity --many of whom share these values and some who may not.

We counter disrespect with respect, hate with love, spitefulness with kindness, rejection with acceptance, ridicule with affirmation, oppression with justice as we drive in traffic, share in sporting events, shop in crowds, work along side disgruntled workers, stand up for someone put down by others.

Life in community can be difficult, angering, frustrating, depressing. Living in grace and justice with others is an up and down road. We are prone to stalling, driving off and abandoning the highway for the low way.

Yet somehow knowing the community depends on us and we depend on others, we keep up the struggle knowing they are in the same struggle as we are.

Most importantly, there is a God who is keeping the covenant with us, the God who is our strength and redeemer; who remains steadfast and faithful; gracious, loving and forgiving; the God who understands our failures, our waywardness.

In the end, the Sinai Covenant along with all God's covenanting with God's people opens up life for us.

The late Lutheran preacher, Edmund Steimle, spoke about the life of faith offering release, spaciousness, a life breaking down "the walls which divide us from each other...." (4)

He based his message on a verse from Psalm 18: “The Lord was my stay. He brought me forth to a large place.” (Psalm 18:5) Referring to the dangers in restricting Christianity to a list of dos and don’ts, Dr. Steimle described a man “whose religion is bounded north, south, east and west by ‘thou shalt nots.’” (5)

He was a man who “...picks his way cautiously and successfully through life, avoiding all the scarlet as well as the petty sins....And then congratulating himself on avoiding these and others hazards, trips and falls flat on his face over the worst hazard of all –self-righteous pride.” (6)

Steimle adds:

No wonder, then, that many a person draws the mistaken conclusion that religion is a narrow, confining business which restricts rather than releases. And yet, the root meaning of that old-fashioned word, salvation, is ‘to be wide’ or ‘spacious.’ Salvation is a vast roominess under God. (7)

The apostle Paul called our life in community under God’s covenant “the foolishness of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18-25).) A God who took the wild chance of sacrifice and death as the way to freedom and life, called the New Covenant in Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.

This is the bedrock of our faith, what holds us in the struggles and failures, and yes, the successes of living in community with love and forgiveness, justice and peace.

This is not a confining life. It is a defining life, a freed life, a life out in the open, a wide and spacious, and at times an exhilarating life in community.

Recently, the weekly newspaper, Lansing City Pulse, carried an article featuring the British scientist and atheist, Richard Dawkins, who was scheduled to speak at MSU. With the article was a photo showing a billboard on a British bus with the message: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” (8)

From another perspective one might revise that advice in this way:
“There just may be a God, one who is gracious and freeing. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life ---- sharing in love and forgiveness, justice and peace with all.”

- (1) Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Augsburg Fortress, Pub., Minneapolis, 2006, p.1160.
- (2) George W. Forell, “Laws for Free People,” The Lutheran Magazine, 01-06-82.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Edmund A. Steimle, “This is the Life,” Are You Looking for God?, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1957, p. 116.
- (5) Ibid., pp. 114-115.
- (6) Ibid., pp.114-115
- (7) Ibid., p. 115.
- (8) Lawrence Consentino, “Speaking with a purpose,” Lansing City Pulse, February 25, 2009, p. 5.