

Pondering the Paradox of Law & Grace

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

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The Old Testament lectionary text today is a very familiar one to all of us and commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments. The ten words or Decalogue stand at the center of Jewish scripture and the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah or Law. The Ten Commandments are stated again in Deuteronomy 5. No other piece of scripture has become so widely known both within the religious community and beyond in secular society. In recent years these ten words have become the center of conflict in a number of communities where they are displayed on a monument, often on a courthouse lawn. One side sees the Ten Commandments as foundational to civil and natural law and the other side seeing the display as a violation of first amendment...that the state should not take a role in establishing any religion.

Psalm 19, the lectionary Psalm for today is a celebration of the law...and not just a celebration by the people, but that all of nature extols the word and ordinances of the Lord. This Psalm brings to mind the majestic chorus, "The Heavens are telling..." from Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*.

I must confess that I did not feel as celebrative as Psalm 19 over the ordinances of the Lord and particularly Exodus 20 and the Ten commandments that came up this Sunday in the lectionary. Don't misunderstand; I have much respect for this time honored text, but turning it into an engaging sermon came to me as a challenge. I remember the Mennonites and the Ten Commandments being reported in a tongue and cheek fashion after Mennonite World Conference in Wichita in 1978. The Wichita Eagle printed an article as the Mennonite were leaving the Convention Center after a week in downtown hotels and restaurants...that the Mennonite came to Wichita with the Ten Commandments and their twenty dollar bills and left town without breaking either.

What does one say that is new and exciting about the Ten Commandments so to avoid the usual yawn that they bring when they come up in the Sunday School quarterly. Maybe it is the fear that lifting up the Ten Commandments may only stoke the flames of the overzealous fundamentals who too often seem to view the coming of the Law written in **stone** as the high point of the church year, rather the **stone** that was rolled away and revealed an empty tomb on Easter Morning. Maybe my hesitation on talking about law this morning was knowing there likely might be a couple of lawyers here. A footnote on that fear goes back to my early ministry day in Cincinnati and church planting where one of the charter families in the church was Ed and Karen Diller. Ed was just out of Harvard Law School and I think had two questions for every spoken thought I had. Seriously, I have deep appreciation for Ed, he has been a pillar in that

congregation whose leadership and friendship I have cherished and believe he will serve us well as the next moderator of Mennonite Church USA.

Well finally I pulled the Believer's Church Commentary on Exodus from my shelf and dusted it off. It is one of thicker commentaries. There are 35 pages on the Exodus 20 passage alone. The very first sentence of commentary is telling about this text which reads as follows... "With the Ten Commandments, we enter the study of the vast and complex subject of OT law." That opening line did not bring me much comfort, but let it serve as a hint to us that we will leave much unsaid about this lectionary text for today.

Enough self pity and avoidance of this text on the Law. I am committed to the lectionary as a healthy way to approach scripture. In Bluffton we have a gathering for prayers each Tuesday morning at 7am for 30 minutes. There is a reading of the lectionary texts and silent reflection between each reading. I also went on your fine website and found a similar commitment to the lectionary texts of the week. So I finally realized there was no honorable way out of this.

The Ten Commandments held a place of providing moral guidance in the early church as they appear in the Didache, an early 2nd century document, which was used as a catechism. The early church fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries associated the Decalogue with the concept of natural law with the notion that they contained universal truths self evident to all people. This notion became a common assumption in Western Christendom. The early English King Alfred in the 9th century prefixed the Decalogue to his own legal code. Calvin and Puritans in the 16th and 17th centuries considered it basic to the law of their respective societies. With the growing secularization in the West the Decalogue has also become a symbol of restrictive legalism in various places. I would guess that a preacher more steeped in fundamentalism would have picked up this text with glee where an Anabaptist would have picked up the Sermon on the Mount.

Several things that Janzen points out in his commentary are helpful:

- The Decalogue is only a sampling of the law as are many other places where law codes are given in the Bible. It is not complete as most Christians tend to see it as covering all of life. If you look at laws in Leviticus 19 for example where important areas are covered such as: protecting the handicapped, insuring justice without partiality, calling for love of neighbor, protecting the stranger, etc...you will not find these in the Ten Commandments. Thus we must see the Decalogue as a sampling of God's will and not a comprehensive coverage.
- Regardless of the Ten Commandments being only an incomplete sampling...we cannot deny the prominence they have achieved. These words come directly from God to the people as they were gathered around the mountain. We are told amidst the lightning and

thunder, fire and smoke there was a thick cloud as people came out of the camp to meet God at the mountain...unlike any other experience of God speaking to the people, as was often the case when God spoke through the prophets. Another feature giving this sampling of Law the prominence it has...it does not deal in detail or technicalities of punishment for breaking any of the laws, but rather paints with a wide brush and states what might be more revealing of a spirit of God or the character of God. Thus, I think we must conclude that it is a very unique sample and the fact that it is repeated in Deuteronomy also speaks to its eminence and importance.

- The place in the story of where the Law is received also makes the Decalogue very unique and special. The people of God are wandering in the wilderness...a bit aimlessly it appears. Yet they are being lead by God and this event of receiving the law comes only after their deliverance and salvation from slavery in Egypt. We often tend to think of the OT as Law (that came first!) and the NT as Gospel or Grace (that followed!). However, we must see that the people experienced Grace (deliverance and salvation) in being lead out of Egypt (Ex 20:2) which is the preface to the coming of the law. It is the same God at Mount Sinai who gave them the Law and invited them to obey it as a way of becoming God's own people...the same God who came to us in Jesus the Christ and invited us follow him in the path to salvation. I think OT scholars would rue the simple formula we often think of the OT and NT...where the OT is Law and the NT is Gospel or Grace. It is the same saving God all the way through the OT and the NT. I think this is helpful in better understanding Jewish theology, while they have not come to know more fully the saving Grace of God we have in Christ, they do see the saving character of God that is revealed in exodus and the coming of the law.

We must understand that the Law alone was not sufficient and we see in the NT that the Law alone even became a new bondage as Jesus confronts the religious leaders of his day with a new law of love that goes beyond any legalism.

I had a little brush with the law back in fall on the way home from church one Sunday morning. It was a magnificent fall day and we just left an inspiring time of worship with our church family at First Mennonite. As Kay and I were driving away from church I was feeling a love for all of God's good creation on this bright and sunny day. I was driving slow and careful, aware of my surroundings, pausing as a young mother collected her children who were running down the edge of the street a head of her. A couple of blocks later I came to a four way stop with good visibility in all directions and not a soul in sight and after slowing and seeing a clear empty road I turned toward home. Apparently I was not as observant of my surroundings as I might have been and suddenly a new rookie Bluffton police officer was flashing their light behind me. My euphoric fall day of peace and love for all suddenly came to an end. I thought I was driving very safely

and respectfully to all and she thought I was breaking the law. She would not answer my question if I was driving in an unsafe manner.

Well, I think I acted in a respectful way to the authority of that moment, but I was really frustrated and had a hard time letting it go for a day or two. I was rehearsing my courtroom defense of how I was driving that day and a long safe driving record that I would lift up to the mayor. I was going to make the point that the police are being paid to protect and keep the public safe, not hide in the bushes looking for victims. Well, I finally admitted to myself that I broke the law and probably did not make a full stop at that intersection as the letter of the states. I recognized that maybe some of the more mature police officers do see their number one role as public safety; others are strictly law enforcement officers which seemed to be the case of the rookie who wrote me up. So I finally let it go and paid my 90 bucks and waived my court appearance and thought maybe there were a few shreds in this story for a sermon illustration someday.

So why do I tell you this story...I think my Sunday last fall brought home to me both the necessity of the law and also the inadequacy of the law. Laws provide order to our lives and help us in avoiding chaos. Yet the law as applied that moment did not bring about an appreciation for the beauty of that fall day, nor the love for my sisters and brothers that I just left in worship, nor did it bring a joy of the Lord that inspired Psalm 19 or Haydn to create his oratorio. The whole matter felt like a paradox that I came to accept. In reflecting on my driving habits in the village since that time, I am more certain to make fuller stops at all stop signs, but not necessarily that I am improving the safety and quality of life in Bluffton, I just do not want to give another rookie cop hiding in the bushes the satisfaction of stalking another victim.

In the brief time remaining let us turn to one of the ten words and ponder for a few moments on what it might mean for us today. In the last 15 years or so I have been drawn to the fourth commandment and have studied and reflected what it has to say to us. Maybe it is all the wrangling and trouble Jesus gets into on the Sabbath with the religious leaders that makes the Sabbath law intriguing. Maybe is from watching the Fiddler on the Roof and falling in love with the ritual, preparation, and practice of the Sabbath in that movie. Tevya singing to his wife "Do you love me". I found that Sabbath scene so inviting I want to be part of it. Maybe it is memories of the Sabbath Sundays growing up in eastern PA. Dinner with my grandparents after church, than Dad and my grandfather who owned an Esso station together and worked six ten hour days, often fell asleep on the sofa reading the paper. My mother coached me to be patient until Dad woke up and than we would go do something fun like go to the playground or the rail yard to watch the steam locomotives. It was truly a special day and a day of rest for my Dad from the other six days. All the stores were closed because there were Sunday Blue laws as they were called. It was a day with family and friends, good foods, and not much agenda, maybe a ride in the country and a stop for ice cream.

I believe there is treasure for us in the Sabbath commandment. It is difficult to mine this treasure because the hustle and bustle of life keeps pulling us in another direction and lures us away from finding the nuggets of this treasure. This commandment holds a unique place among the 10 words for several reasons:

- It is the longest commandment both in the Exodus 20 record and also in Deuteronomy 5. Compare this to: you should not kill; you should not steal; etc. So it causes one to ask from a literary critical point of view...why so much space for this fourth commandment? Does it have special importance among the ten? Is it the easiest to overlook or run by, thus it has more space so that it may capture our attention?
- There is a different rationale given for keeping the Sabbath in the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts. In Exodus the seventh day is consecrated and special because of the Creator God who made the world in six days and rested on the seventh and the implication and command is that so should we. It might be suggesting that we as persons created in God's image also need to take our cues from God's nature and follow in a rhythm of creating for six days and then resting on the seventh. In Deuteronomy the same charge is to keep a rhythm of six days of labor and then a Sabbath rest. However, the reason stated is not because of the creation in six days and a rest day on the seventh. The rhythm of a Sabbath every seven days is to remember that you were slaves and the Lord brought you out of slavery with no help from yourselves. Thus, the implication is that we cease our "*doing*" each Sabbath so that we remember the real source of our well being is not from our own labor, but that we are sustained and saved by God's Grace alone. The Sabbath commandment is so we remember the Grace and deliverance that came prior to any demands as law would bring. Scholars also believe that Sabbath commandment was important to the identity of People of God during the 50-60 years of exile in Babylon. While in that foreign land it was important to stop their doing and remember who they were and Who really was sustaining them in those difficult days. It may be a timely word for these recessionary days we are in. (Article in Mennonite Weekly states Europe is reconsidering the 7-24 mentality of United States)
- The Sabbath commandment as number four stands at a pivotal place among the ten. The first three deal with our relationship with God...have no other gods, no graven images, no wrongful use of the name of the Lord. Then the Sabbath commandment and followed by the six commands that all focus on our relationships with others...honor parents, no killing, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting. So the first three are on what we can call our vertical relationship with God and the last six after the Sabbath

commandment are on our horizontal relationships with one another. Could this 4th commandment be key in holding together our vertical and horizontal relationships??

We all know of the divides in the church today...we Mennonites notwithstanding. There are the evangelicals (by one definition) that want to talk about our relationship with God and seem to lean more towards the vertical relationship. Then there are the Anabaptists seeking discipleship and concerned with peace and justice. We might see them as leaning more towards the horizontal relationships and the last six commandments.

I leave you with the hypothesis that the fourth commandment on Sabbath may be a key to renewing both our vertical and horizontal relationships. It may be a key to restoring us to health, joy, and happiness. There is a sacred rhythm in life that we too often miss, even in all our greatest wisdom. We did not spend time on the NT text for today where Paul says, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor 1:25). Thus we stop our "doing" for a day a week to realize anew the saving power of God in our lives and in the world. It is not an easy matter to honor a Sabbath rhythm and avoid the legalism of the Pharisees. It is probably best to start in a simple way. I like your name Emmaus Road. I recall being in Palestine at a church where Emmaus is thought to be about 6-7 miles east of Jerusalem. Cleopas and his friend who met Jesus in the breaking of the bread did quite a bit of walking (maybe running) that day. May be one way for you to honor the Sabbath is to commit to a long walk once a week. I have long felt that so much happened in people meeting Jesus in the first century as they did all that walking from town to town. I believe that it can still happen in the 21st century too if we are ready to pause and take the first step toward that redemptive rhythm of a God who has come to us in Jesus the Christ.