

Exodus 20: 1-7; John 2:13-22 According to the Word of God

When I was asked to teach “ethics” to the seventh graders at Menaul School, I told them that if I were to teach ethics, it would have to be a course on Jesus’s parables. Ethics is about discerning the right living, and Jesus parables are vivid stories that teach us exactly that, often in surprising, counter-cultural ways.

But when I started planning the curriculum, I soon realized that I had to first go back and talk about the Greatest Commandment Jesus taught: Love God and Love your neighbor, because Jesus’ parables flow out of these double commandments.

Then I realized I had to really go back to the Hebrew Scriptures, to the Ten Commandments, because Jesus’s summary of the Law into the double commandments was the summary of the Ten Commandments: as Rose Marie just read to us, the first 4 commandments which are the instructions on how to love God, and the next 6 commandments instructions on how to Love our neighbors.

And today, on this 3rd Sunday in Lent, the invitation before us is go back even further and look at the Ten Commandments, the Ten Instructions God had for God’s people, whom God had just rescued from the bondage in Egypt, in the light of the Covenant between God and God’s creation.

On the 1st Sunday in Lent, we listened to the Covenant God established with Noah after the flood, never to destroy the earth and all that lived in it. It was God’s promise to God’s self, God’s self-reminder, if you will, without putting any conditions on the part of the creatures.

Then last Sunday, we listened to God make a covenant with Abraham, telling Abraham that God will make him the ancestor of a multitude of nations and that kings of peoples will come from Sarah. Again, without a mention of any conditions; no “IF you do this, THEN...” The biblical covenant is God’s absolute will and intention for the humankind, that no human can bend or change; no ifs and buts. God’s Covenant stands forever because God wills it, and it bespeaks God’s overwhelming Love for God’s people that no human failure or disobedience can overpower.

According to the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Scripture, Moses placed the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments in the Ark of the Covenant. So, what does it mean to listen to these Ten Words of God as part of this Covenant, this promise of God's absolute love for us? When we understand that these Commandments are what God lovingly provided for us as guardrail for us as we live in this Covenant relationship with God? Does it make us hear them differently? Not as a rule or regulation to restrict our lives but as Direction and Instructions to live more deeply into this loving relationship with God, and out of that relationship, into the relationship with one another?

For example, if you're like me, you might have cringed, when you heard "for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." Our God is a jealous God, whose fierce Love would not stand anything that comes between us and our God and steal our devotion from God, because God can love us better than anyone else can; I mean, that's as classic as a love song goes. Adele, anyone? If the parents deviate and turn away from God, God will not let them go but pursue them for generations, "punishing them." And what would that "punishing" look like? It doesn't say God would "hurt us." God punishment aims at bringing back those who reject God, so that they may not perish.

The Ten Commandments are really Ten Teachings or Directions that describe the way of Life God wills for God's people. Sure, God loves us even when we fail to follow these teachings, but to disobey them is to wander into the ways of death, away from God's will for us to live abundant life. Sure, God loves us no matter what, but when we do not follow God's instructions, we do so only to our detriment. God gave us these directions in our journey through the wilderness of our world because God knows, left to our own devices, we choose our own demises.

The Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, meaning Ten Words of God, they are to keep us walking in the way that leads to Life, like a lamp onto our feet and like the

shepherd's staff, re-directing the sheep that go astray. They are the Word of God that reforms us.

And when the Word of God written on the stone tablets didn't quite re-direct God's people, when we proved to be more stubborn than the stones, God kept God's Covenant with Noah and did not wipe away the creation but, instead, sent the Word of God in the human form to live among us... which brings us to the scene from the Gospel reading this morning. Jesus, his words and actions, is the Word of God for us today, re-directing and re-forming us that we may live. Hear now, the Gospel according to John2: 13-22.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

All 4 Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, a version of this story of Jesus "overturning the tables" in the Temple in Jerusalem. So, if you grew up going to church, you heard some version of this story rather often. And I think it has a lot to do with how I, as a child, was always a bit afraid of Jesus, like an uncle who would scold me when I got caught doing something naughty. I grew up singing "Jesus loves me this I know, for

the Bible tells me so...” but I never got over this image of rather angry Jesus. The image made me cringe just like when I heard the words of the “jealous God.” What was he so angry about?

Some people take this story to be a proof of Jesus’s humanity, saying “See, Jesus was a real human; he got angry, just like we do.” There’s a lesson there, I suppose, since there are people who think being Christian is about being patient, meek and nice, never getting upset or angry. To be sure, there are times and situations our commitment to what is sacred leads us to action in protest, in the face of injustice, oppression, exploitation....

In fact, the versions of this story in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus angrily says “My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers.” In their telling of the story, Jesus is angry at the corrupt and exploitive practice of the money changers and the venders of the birds and animals. Jesus’ anger is directed at those who abused the poor.

But the story we hear John tells us this morning is a bit different. Making a whip with a cord, Jesus drove animals out of the temple court, pouring out money and overturning tables as he went. Now, Passover was a pilgrimage feast, where people traveled to Jerusalem from afar, and the animals were required for burnt offerings in the Temple, so they needed to buy animals, and in order to do that they needed to change the Greek or Roman coins to the legal currency in Jerusalem. The trade had become necessary in order to do the worship rituals right, turning the Temple into a marketplace.

Jerusalem was the geographical and spiritual center of the Jewish faith, and the Temple in Judaism was the locus of God’s presence on earth. John’s account does not mention any abuse per se going on, but Jesus rejects the selling and buying, that arose out of necessity to keep the Temple worship; Jesus meant to cleanse the Temple of this practice had come between God and the people’s worship of God. He meant to reform the whole system of the Temple worship.

When the Temple authority asks him what signs, or what authority, he can show them, Jesus talks about he himself as the Temple. Those listening didn’t understand him

then, but Jesus was pointing himself as the locus of the presence of God in the world. For us, then, the church as the body of Christ is the locus of God's presence, and Apostle Paul talk about individual body of those who serve Christ as the Temple. All subject to cleansing and reforming.

What we learn from this story of Jesus, the Word of God, cleansing the Temple is captured in the motto of our Reformed Christian faith from the 17th century: "the church reformed, always being reformed, according to the word of God."

We, the church, do not reform or cure ourselves. It is according to the word of God, that we are reformed and continues to be reformed. The Scripture as the Word of God, and Jesus as the Word of God, are doing the reforming.

Jesus issued a radical challenge to the authority of the religious institutions of his day. Now the Christian Churches are part of the religious institutions of our day. In order for us to remain the body of Christ, the locus of the presence of God in the World, we the church, and the individual members of it, needs to reflect on where we need to be reformed, and be opened to be reformed according to the Word of God. Our God is the jealous God, whose fierce love keep us in the Covenant that God upholds. We've been rescued, we've been forgiven, we've been freed to walk in the way of God that leads to Life.

That is our Lenten journey. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him" and be reformed, in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.