

North Kildonan United Church

4th October 2020 ~ Rev. Don Johnson

"The Ten Commandments"

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Philippians 3: 4b-14

Matthew 21: 33-46

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen (Psalm 19:4)

In November 2018 a friend and I spent a couple of weeks in London, England. London is a great city and hidden in amongst the usual traffic and warning signs found in any city, can be found some very clever and funny notices.

One in particular stands out for me. It was on the side of a building and it said, first in bold letters: "**NO DUMPING**", followed by "*offenders should be ashamed of themselves*". What a clever way to get the point across-you can almost picture an annoyed parent wagging a finger at the offender caught leaving garbage at that spot.

This sign is about guilt and shame, and I think much of our understanding about rules and regulations and keeping the law contains an element of guilt and shame. There is usually shame and embarrassment in being caught transgressing a law. The other side of that, of course, is the potential self-satisfaction or smug pride we might feel by not being guilty of transgressions. "*At least I'm not (fill in the blank) like that person,*" we might say or think to ourselves. Think of the speeder pulled over and the other driver who slowed down just in time.

But there are more ways of understanding law than it just being a list created by politicians and judges of what or what not to do as a citizen.

Psalm 19 is the suggested psalm for this day, and I began today's sermon with the familiar concluding words of that psalm. But there are more words from that psalm to hear, beginning at the 7th verse.

*"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb."*

The laws the psalmist extolls speak of the relationship between God and God's people, a relationship based on God's saving acts, God's loving acts towards God's people.

Today we hear the giving of the Law in the form of the Ten Commandments. These familiar words are easily misunderstood.

Some see the Ten Commandments as a list of rules that, if you keep them, or at least think you are keeping them, then you can believe yourself to be a good person. Sort of God's top ten helpful hints to living a good life and on the surface it might seem easy to follow them-until you actually look at the deeper meaning of these commandments. But to base your religious faith on an attempt to keep these laws without any relationship to the One who formulated the laws, is to fool oneself. We may say we don't steal or have never murdered anyone, that when we remember we visit mom and dad, and to be honest, we've never really been that interested in what the neighbours own, but really how far does that go. Any non-believer can, and probably should, do the same thing, so let's look at the text properly.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

We begin with this affirmation of who God is, a God of love who has claimed and cared for and led the people of Israel from slavery to freedom and new life. The commandments delivered on Mount Sinai are the living word of God, the beginning of instructions that will become more elaborate and comprehensive as time goes on. These teachings are an ever expanding guide for making life holy, and while many times the people will fail at keeping the law, God's love will not fail them.

The Ten Commandments are not a complete summary. Rather, they are like shorthand, teachings that need interpretation, teachings that over time are studied and debated and written about by rabbis, sages, teachers, and clergy in both Judaism and Christianity.

As such, the Ten Commandments are based on a covenantal understanding between God and God's people. A covenant is an agreement between two parties on how the two will exist together and live into their future. For instance we think of marriage as a covenant between two people, an arrangement, or I should say an agreement, based in mutual love, respect and understanding, care and affection, supported by forgiveness and self-sacrifice, recognized by all as a relationship to be honoured.

So too did God enter into a covenant with the people of Israel, based on God's love and the people's response. In love God gives the people teachings, commandments, the law, so that Israel might form themselves into a community that respects and cares for one another.

In the law, the people are given the parameters, the boundaries of behaviour. They are taught what not to do, but they are not restrained in what they can do. So they are to live their lives freely by limiting those destructive behaviours that harm life and happiness.

Think of the promise this way of living offers. How might life be if there is no need to be afraid of being murdered or having your possessions stolen, of your relationship being attacked through adultery, of people telling lies about you or really wanting what is rightfully yours, if parents know that they will not be forgotten in their older years. What might a society be like if there is this mutual respect?

We don't need to ponder living such a way because for most of us, we don't live with such fears, though of course that can't be said for everyone everywhere.

The commandments of God are God's gracious gift to the people. Keeping the commandments are Israel's way of responding to God's love.

And what of us, we who are grafted onto the tree which is Israel, we who through Christ are also God's people? How are we to live?

Hear these words from the Gospel of Mark.

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'"

Amen.