

Liberating Love: Healing Law

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 Then God spoke all these words: 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. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Philippians 3:4b-14 Paul writes: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

I love getting little surprises in the mail, and never more than these days when it all seems to be glossy campaign flyers of questionable literary merit and dubious veracity. This week, my surprise was a big packet full of original writing from a friend. I'll call him Ted, short for Theodore (which means "gift of God"). Back in the 1950s, Ted was a boy exploring every inch of the white pine forest where the ARC retreat center would later come to be. I met him when he rediscovered ARC in the 21st century. Ted has Aspergers, and like many neuro-diverse people, he is brilliant. Various physical and mental challenges have made his life...interesting. His careers have included singing professionally, managing a group home, betting on the horses, and surviving homelessness. Through it all, he's maintained a spirit of curiosity, exuberance, joy. His writings are brief and pithy, sometimes prayerful, often hilarious. The one that jolted me out of the story I've been stuck in was about gratitude. He wrote:

"By writing down five things you're grateful for, you open your ability to access the accumulated depository of all that is - the great 'what is.' If, instead, you write down five things that frustrate you or make you mad - negative affirmations - what do you learn? Or what do you contribute? The universe already knows that the sun can burn, that people can disappoint, that things can go wrong. But what 'magical, mystical' thing happened to you today that inspired love, wonder, reverence, and awe? Maybe even made you feel ecstatic about living? A feeling, an insight, an emotion that's never been experienced: that's what the universe is interested in."

Honestly, it had never occurred to me that the universe might be interested in what evoked awe in me this morning. But what if I could surprise the universe - or God?

You may wonder what this has to do with the 10 Commandments and the Apostle Paul's apparent repudiation of them. Okay, it's not obvious. But let me explain. When God spoke to Moses on the mountain, it was to present something way different than what we usually think of as law. I think God meant to inspire what Ted talked about: love, wonder, reverence, and awe! Here we have the Israelites, murmuring their way through the wilderness. They've been pursued by armies, terrified, hungry, thirsty, not to mention footsore and bored. They are recovering from 400 years of the kind of laws that kept them securely under Pharaoh's thumb - not unlike the Jim Crow laws of the last century, designed to keep Black people uneducated and unequal. And they're having a hard time with freedom. It takes 40 years to remember mercy, learn trust, and practice the presence of God. In fact, they won't even enter the Promised Land until everyone who came out of Egypt has died, and a new generation with a new mindset has taken over.

The law that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai was unlike any previous set of laws. For one thing, you could count the commandments on your two hands - a definite aid to memory - unlike the Code of Hammurabi of Babylon; it was written several hundred years earlier and contained 282 laws, a lot of them penalties for infractions. But mostly, the 10 Commandments were not so much about keeping people in line and punishing them when they strayed as keeping

them safe and well, at peace with God and each other. They were designed to heal wounds inflicted by oppression and poverty, wounds of living at the bottom of a pretty rotten heap. These laws made them into men and women worthy of the Promised Land.

The Presbyterian Wise Women last year studied the 10 Commandments as “Love Written in Stone,” ten Words of God that acted as salve (i.e., *salvation*) for universal human ills: they are about a God who uses awe, and reverence, and wonder to build an abiding relationship with them rather than keep them kowtowing to a police state; a God whose dearest desire is that they know they belong to God and to each other. “I am the Lord your God” means you belong to me, and I am your one and only, not like other gods.” The law about keeping the Sabbath is an antidote to humanity’s constant busy-ness and striving for success. The Word about honoring parents reminds us that we are rooted and grounded in the love of those who’ve nurtured and taught us. The Word against killing? It’s more than murder; it’s about killing the spirit, too, with rejection, contempt, put downs. The Word against false witness is not just about lies; it’s a warning that deception erodes relationships with people and destroys trust in government. In a way, you might say that the Israelites emerged from Egypt in a state of subdued chaos with a low-grade depression going on, in feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. These laws restored them to confidence in a future full of hope. They restored them to God and to reliable, responsible community. God’s 10 Words got them out of the story they were stuck in.

We humans get stuck in the wrong story when we turn God’s Words of love into an individual rulebook, where our greatest anxiety is whether we measure up ourselves, and our greatest satisfaction is pointing out where our neighbors are falling short. Yes, people fail and whole civilizations flounder and die, but as Ted would say, the universe already knows that. Isn’t it much more reverent to God and renewing to our spirits to be surprised by joy? Isn’t God more delighted with one act of unexpected courage that saved a life, or one chance reconnection with an old friend that renewed relationship, or one love song to God sung enthusiastically, from the heart, no matter how off-key, than with any amount of gloomy lawful behavior?

Here is where Paul gets it right, and returns us to the original spirit of the 10 Commandments. Before he met Jesus on the road, he was a Pharisee; keeping the law was the way to prove your love for God and win your way to heaven. They were good people, those Pharisees. But they had lost the joy. Paul was zealous, as many people today are zealous, enforcing laws that were more hurtful than helpful. But in our passage, if we could translate it out of Bible-speak to present day mode, we would see Paul practically jumping up and down with excitement. “Hey, guys! Get this! I was wrong! Stuck in the wrong story. Everything I knew - pure garbage! What counts is, I’m God’s guy now! Like, buddies with Jesus Christ! BFF, best friends forever, no matter what. Suffering, death, you name it, I can deal, because God’s got me and I’ve got God! And God’s got you, too; do you get that? Christ is *in you*. And I really want to get to know the Christ in you, ‘cause that’s what this law of faith is really all about! Love is loose in the world. For real.”

Friends, this is what the Word is trying to tell us today: We need to get back to laws that heal instead of harm. In fact, maybe we need to heal laws that keep so many people still squashed under a big institutional thumb. Our world seems to be suffering from chaos and a low grade depression. Why should it be so, when “the great what is” is out there waiting for us? What will it take to get us unstuck from this story, to bring us back to confidence in the future, and a sense of community we can count on? Don’t bother enumerating the bad things. Count what gives you joy, wonder, awe, or even a sense of ecstasy. My faith was restored this week by my friend Ted, who lives without telephone or computer, and sends me packets of hope in the mail - God’s gift to me. And, who knows, maybe God and the universe are just waiting for me to surprise them, too. Like Paul, I’ll make that my goal: I’ll jettison the rubbish from the past, and hang on to the promise of a healed future. I’ll keep my eyes on the prize that lives in Christ who lives in you. Are you with me? Maybe together we can add just a bit of wonder to the storehouse of joy in the universe. Amen. TBTG

Prayers

God of woods and waters, of monarchs, crickets, and falling leaves, open our eyes to wonder, open our ears to music, open our minds to laws that heal instead of harm, and paths of love that lead straight from your heart into our world. Open us to living in and with you.

You have written your law in our hearts - commandments that tell us how to love and trust one another, how to love and trust you. May we value these gifts above all that the world would tell us about legal and illegal - for in your eyes, no person is illegal, no race is better than any other, and all of us are created equally in your image.

God of liberating love, heal our eyes to see the prize; be our great surprise! But heal also those who are burdened with illness: with faulty hearts and diseased cells and laboring lungs; especially those diagnosed with the coronavirus. And strengthen all those who care for them and risk their own health to save them.

God of abundance, we are amazed at another harvest filling the fields all around us. Give us grace to share what we have been given. And may those who sow and reap receive the just rewards of their labor.

Merciful presence, always near, let your saving help be felt by those who are alone, or threatened, sick or troubled in any way. Let us mourn with those who mourn, but let us dance with those who dance, too. And may we surprise even ourselves with the confidence and exuberance you instill in us, as best friends forever with Jesus, in whose name we pray. AMEN