

“Ode to the Law”

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19:1-14

At the front of the Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church there is a section entitled, “Preparation for Worship” which consists almost entirely of prayers. Presumably, if the book were in the pews, one could read these prayers as a way of getting into the right frame of mind for worship. And along with the prayers is a little section entitled, “The Law of God,” which is a shortened form of what was read earlier from the book of Exodus, the Ten Commandments. Above this reading of the Ten Commandments, in small red rubrics, it says this:

“In preparation for worship, the people may wish to meditate on the law of God.”

The people may wish to meditate on the law of God! Now who but Presbyterians would ever think of saying something like that? Well maybe the Puritans. They were pretty strong on law. A sea captain was returning to New England after a long voyage during the time of the Puritans. The day he returned was a Sunday. His wife came out of the house to greet him and they kissed. For that infraction he was put into the stocks. Seems a little harsh, wouldn't you say?

Another group that might have said something like what it says in our Book of Common Worship would be the Hebrews, through whom the Ten Commandments have come to us. They revered the law like no one else, and in fact, still do. The law, the Torah! The ancient Hebrews not only loved the law, they wrote poetry and sang songs about the law of God. Listen to the words of Psalm 19, our Psalm for today:

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 forever;
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.
Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11)

Could anything sound stranger to the ears of the modern expression of Homo sapiens? That laws, commandments and precepts are, as one person expressed it:

“soul-reviving, wise-making, heart-rejoicing, eye-enlightening.”¹

The modern human being, *Homo-neglectus*, *Homo-don't bother us*, doesn't get it. Why would anyone sing songs about the law, about a list of do's and don'ts? Our songs are about freedom, about the open road, about the wind in your face. Our songs are about removing restraints, letting go, being our own person: “Don't fence me in!” “I did it my way.” (My taste in music is woefully dated. I'm sure that others can think of more current examples.)

And it is not just the secular folks who feel that way. It is also the religious folks, especially we Protestants. The watchword of the Protestant reformation was: “the just shall live by faith.” We have been taught that it is not by obeying laws that we come to God, but that it is by faith. That whole system of laws was the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, we've been told. We are people of the New Covenant, the New Testament. We are people of the covenant of grace. The law has been superseded. We quote the Fourth Gospel: “the law came from Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17) We quote the Apostle Paul: “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. (Galatians 2:16)

So it is puzzling indeed for us moderns, even modern Christians, to hear a hymn of praise in which God's law is said to be: "sweeter than honey...more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold." We scratch our heads when we hear about a rabbi living in Bombay some years ago who wrote in his journal: "This evening, I should like to do what I always do when I am assailed by a sort of spiritual loneliness – repair for solace to the Ten Words (the Ten Commandments)."² Are we missing something?

The psychologist Rollo May has a chapter in one of his books entitled: *Too Much Freedom Makes Us Mad*, "mad" here being not angry but crazy. In it he says this: "An individual can be free in personality only to the extent that he has a structure outside himself to act with and react against, only to the extent that he has a destiny which is not himself."³ A structure outside of oneself -- interesting thought. To be free we need boundaries and a destiny that is not ourselves.

In one of the old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, a man dies and arrives at the gate of a beautiful place. He asks the creature at the gate, "What do people do here?" And the answer given to him is: "Whatever they want." And so off he goes into this paradise of pleasure and adventure to do whatever he wants. After a while he comes back to the gate and asks the creature: "What else do people do here?" And again he is told: "Whatever they want." Off he goes again to do whatever he wants, to follow the desires of his heart for as long as he likes. But after a while he returns. He is bored silly doing whatever he wants and he says to the creature at the gate: "If this is heaven, what must hell be like?" And the creature answers: "This is hell."⁴ Like the child in a progressive school who said: "Do we have to do what we want to today?"⁵

Too much freedom makes us mad! I heard an educator once who claimed that the happiest students on campus were the students who were involved in either sports or music. These were the students who had the most demands made upon them, with the most rigid schedules, who had to get up early to be at band practice, or stay late for football practice or track; the ones who had to have some discipline, who had to commit to certain routines and who didn't have a great deal of free time. These, this educator suggested, were the happiest, most content on campus.

Likewise, one of the greatest gifts parents can give to their children, I am convinced, is structure, rules, boundaries, guidelines either to live within or to rebel against. But even if the child or young person chooses to rebel, at least he or she has something to push off of. It is still a kind of anchor in that person's life. Parents don't do their children any favors by not establishing rules and boundaries. So yes, maybe we are missing something in our quest for freedom and our dismissing of the law as no longer applicable to us.

You may have seen in the news the results of a new survey on religion in America conducted by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. One figure that were especially interesting to me had to do with mainline Protestants, people like us, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ. Those in mainline Protestant churches declined from 18.7 % in 1990 to 12.9 % in 2008. Another group of interest consisted of those who identify themselves merely as Christian, Evangelical/born again or non-denominational. This group grew from 5% in 1990 to 11.8% in 2008.⁶ I don't know all of the reasons for why these changes have taken place in our society, but I can't help wondering if part of it, at least, is a desire to be free of organizational structure and all that goes with that. Maybe it is partly a desire to just be free to do what they want.

So what do we do with the Ten Commandments, with the Torah, the law? Maybe you heard about the couple that went to church one Sunday when the minister gave a fiery sermon on the Ten Commandments. As this couple left that morning the husband leaned over to the wife and said, "At least I haven't made any graven images."

What do we do with the Ten Commandments? Well, first of all, I think we need to appreciate the Ten Commandments for what they are. Despite what we have seen in the movies and despite what a literalistic reading of the story might tell us, there is a human element involved. The text may say that they were written with the finger of God, but they also have the fingerprints of humans all over them. They come out of a particular time period in history and out of a particular culture. In the commandment about coveting, it is clear that your neighbor's wife is on the same par as your neighbor's ox or donkey. Both were considered nothing more than the property of a man. Likewise reference is made to male and female slaves. The Ten Commandments have to be appreciated in the light of the context out of which they came.

And yet at the same time, they are part of our faith tradition, and they can still speak to us. Despite some cultural concepts that are abhorrent to us now, there are timeless principles that still apply, for example, that it is wrong to covet what belongs to someone else. We can learn something about contentment, about how we don't really have to have the latest, the biggest, the best, the grandest. We could recognize that these ancient words have been revered for good reason.

In John Calvin's liturgy of 1545 the order of worship includes the reading of the Ten Commandments, just as we have done today. But what is interesting is where they are placed. We might think that Calvin would have put them right before the prayer of confession, as a kind of reminder of what the standard is and how far short we fall from the standard, as Martin Luther did in his liturgy.⁷ But that is not where he placed them. Instead he put them after the prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon. After we have confessed our sins and heard the words of forgiveness, then the Ten Commandments are read as a kind of guide and encouragement, something for which to be grateful. The law as soul-reviving, wise-making, heart-rejoicing, eye-enlightening.

So what should we do with them? We should certainly appreciate them as part of our religious heritage, as a code of behavior that has stood the test of time. And maybe the Book of Common Worship has it right. Maybe we should meditate on them. Maybe, like all of Scripture, we should give them our thoughtful, yet not uncritical consideration. Oh, and in that same section of Preparation for Worship, immediately following the Ten Commandments is something called the "Summary of the Law." It is a quote from Matthew, something that Jesus said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. A second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Words that are as sweet as honey, and more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold.
"The people may wish to meditate on the law of God."

¹ *Texts for Preaching*, p. 215

² *Word & Witness* Vol. 94.2 Year B

³ Rollo May, *Springs of Creative Living*, p. 80

⁴ from a lecture by Jay Holstein, Prof. of Religion, Univ. of Iowa

⁵ Rollo May, *Springs of Creative Living*, p. 82

⁶ *American Religious Identification Survey*, Trinity College

⁷ John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 183