PENTECOST 19

Proper 22 - Year A

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

20 Then God spoke all these words,

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of
the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you
shall have no other gods before me.

4 "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.

7 "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.

8 "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six
days you shall labor and do all your work.

12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that your
days may be long in the land that the Lord your God
is giving you.

13 "You shall not murder.

14 "You shall not commit adultery.

15 "You shall not steal.

16 "You shall not bear false witness against your
neighbor.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you
shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female
slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your
neighbor."

18 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 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and
we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we
die." 20 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."

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

There's something about the Ten Commandments that engages my Inner Child. Not a fun, playful Inner Child, but a child who is very keenly invested in rules: Children naturally are interested in rulemaking, rule-keeping, and rule-enforcement. When I read the Ten Commandments, my Inner Child engages: Almost subconsciously, I begin comparing my life (or the lives of others if I'm feeling judge-y!) with these laws, weighing how we measure up.

The children's faith formation curriculum Godly Play has a lesson about the Ten Commandments. The lesson is called the "Ten Best Ways to Live." The lesson acknowledges life is complicated, and it is not always possible to live this way; parents get divorced, we lie, we covet, we make mistakes.

What's essential is this: God did not make these rules as the play of some kind of divine arbiter. Rather, the Ten Commandments (and all the moral codes in Scripture) point to God's love for us: God knows we, as humans, have a propensity to operate in ways that are small and selfish –and ultimately sabotage our living good and joyful lives in community.

These commandments remind us of the best ways to live: Giving us guidance how on to live in right relationships with God and one another.

Discussion Questions

Do you think of a spiritual life as rules to follow or guidelines on the best way to live? If it is the latter, how would your spiritual life change if your perspective shifted?

How would you write a summary of the best ways to live, as informed by Scripture and your own spiritual journey?

Psalm 19

[1] The heavens declare the glory of God, *
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
[2] One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
[3] Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard,
[4] Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world.
[5] In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun; *
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber; it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
[6] It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again; *
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
[7] The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.
[8] The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes.
[9] The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
[10] More to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.
[11] By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
[12] Who can tell how often he offends? *
cleanse me from my secret faults.
[13] Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense.
[14] Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

Poetry often has a turning point or "hinge" written into it. It appears the poem is going in one direction and – surprise! – the poet pivots taking the reader in a new and unexpected direction.

Psalms are ancient poems. They were once songs – music long lost, we receive them as poetry today. Psalm 19 begins as a meditation on God's revelation in creation; it recalls those awe-full moments when humans experience the presence of the Divine in a glorious sunrise or a stunning grand vista. Then the poem pivots, reveling in the moral beauty of God's revelation in Scripture.

How are the two interconnected? It's a question on which to meditate, not an answer to be known and explained. The poet of Psalm 19 experienced both in equal measure. Do you?

Discussion Question

How do you experience God's revelation in nature? In Scripture? Are the two interconnected?

Philippians 3:4b-14

[4] I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh,
I have more: [5] 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; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as
to righteousness under the law, blameless.

[7] Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to
regard as loss because of Christ. [8] 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 [9] 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. [10] I want to know Christ and the power of his
resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by
becoming like him in his death, [11] if somehow I may
attain the resurrection from the dead.

[12] Not that I have already obtained this or have already
reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for
which Christ has laid hold of me. [13] Brothers and
sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it,
but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies
behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I
press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the
heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

Fun fact: There are curse words in Scripture. They've gotten cleaned up, since their translation from the original Hebrew and Greek, but the original authors would emphasize their insights using the strongest of language.

In this passage, Paul explains how he regards all his religious societal privilege – and the "loss of all things" – in comparison to knowing Christ. In the original Greek, he uses a word stronger than "rubbish." "Manure" might be another possible word one could use, to keep the translation family-friendly.

Translation trivia aside, Paul communicates the very clear set of values which organizes his perspective: Christ is his focus. Everything else is an off-putting distraction.

Paul was writing this letter to the Philippians while sitting in prison, awaiting trial on trumped-up religious charges. He experienced the death-dealing ways of religious convictions held too tightly. Remember: "Christianity" (as the world religion we know today) did not exist at the writing of this letter. Rather, it was a group of (mostly Jewish) people whose lives had been transformed by the teachings and ministry of Jesus. They called themselves simply, "Followers of the Way." While we cannot go back to this time and culture, there is much we can learn from it.

Discussion Questions

What privileges or benefits do I hold onto too tightly?
What distracts me from the joy-filled life following Jesus into living God's dream for humanity?

Matthew 21:33-46

33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner
who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a
winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he
leased it to tenants and went away. 34 When the
harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the
tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants
seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and
stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more
than the first, and they treated them in the same
way. 37 Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They
will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the
son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come,
let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they
seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed
him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes,
what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him,
"He will put those wretches to a miserable death and
lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him
the produce at the harvest time."

42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the
scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes'?

43 "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be
taken away from you and given to a people that
produces its fruits. 44 The one who falls on this stone
will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on
whom it falls."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his
parables, they realized that he was speaking about
them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared
the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

Jesus is on a tear. The tension is building between Jesus and the religious authorities, and Jesus makes it clear the life of faith is transformative and topsy-turvy: He has no patience for platitudes or religious self-deception. In the verses leading up to this parable, he has entered victoriously into Jerusalem (think Palm Sunday), cleansed the temple, and cursed a fig tree – And that's only in the first half of this chapter! In the second half of this chapter, Jesus and the religious authorities are in an intellectual sparring match. The Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to say something on which they can bring him to trial. Jesus, for his part, tries to hold the chief priests and Pharisees accountable, challenging their hypocrisy.

It's easy to think of the chief priests and Pharisees as the "bad guys" in Scripture. But the truth is, when Jesus was addressing the chief priests and Pharisees, he was addressing religious people – people who were making a real effort to live lives in obedience to God. Therefore, we – the sorts of people who read and write Bible studies – might have more in common with the Pharisees than we might think! When Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, I often wonder what Jesus is trying to teach *me*. This leads to some questions for reflection….

Discussion Questions

Is there a challenging person (or persons) in my life that I dismiss out of hand? (Maybe they're not religious enough or educated enough or…) What might God be trying to teach me through them? Is this an opportunity to learn to produce the fruits of the kingdom (as in v. 43), with the help of the Spirit?

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