***COMMANDMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Exodus 20:1-21 and Matthew 26:26-29

As many of you know, our preschool has been up and running for the past month with quite a few adjustments due to COVID-19. We have been able to move ahead with three classes – two classes of three-year-olds with six in each class and one class of pre-K kids with seven in the class. We have more social distancing, more time outside, more independent play, and daily temperature checks on arrival in the morning, but the kids and teachers have done a great job of adjusting and thriving! Inside the building they all wear masks without much complaint. On the playground teachers and kids have been able to take off the masks, but this week the state health regs changed to mandate masks for teachers outside as well; so the teachers’ masks will stay on - inside and out (but not inside out) – until the regs say it is okay to remove them.

Across our nation there has been tension throughout this pandemic over suggested guidelines and mandated policies intended to curb the spread of the virus – especially with regard to face coverings. Many folks have embraced the medical advice and guidelines in order to stay safe and keep others safe. But too many folks have spurned the health guidelines and opposed the regulations, often with a refrain of, “No one is going to tell me what to do!” That response reflects the tension between public policy to protect the public good and an individual’s right to choose for him/herself. As most of you know, the number of cases in our nation and number of deaths from the virus have far exceeded that of other nations in raw numbers and per capita. There are many reasons for that poor performance, including disinformation that refuses to take the virus seriously, but part of the explanation is also tied to our history of rugged individualism that fiercely defends the rights of individuals to make their own choices – good or bad! Given that tradition, I couldn’t help wondering how we fiercely independent Americans might have reacted to the handing down of those words from the Lord to the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

In Hebrew they are referred to as the “Ten Words”; we know them as the Ten Commandments, but I wonder if we don’t really regard them as the Ten Suggestions! Do we really embrace them as God’s commands for our lives and life together, or do we see them as God’s suggestions for how we should live? The language may say, “You shall and you shall not…” but we may hear, “You should or should not…” Are these words mandatory for God’s people today, or are they just divine suggestions from long ago and far away? Despite all the attention they garner, especially around their display in public settings, many folks don’t know what they actually say. Martin Luther once suggested:

*Those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

I daresay none of us know them perfectly and many of us know little more than the number of the commandments – that would be ten! We know vaguely what they say, but we don’t really know them or their significance in the life of Israel and for us as Christians.

The people who first received those commandments arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai as a ragtag bunch of newly-freed slaves in search of a home. Moses led them out from under Pharaoh’s bitter yoke in Egypt, but they had little identity or unity apart from their ancestral ties to Abraham, their confidence in Moses, and their faith in the God of Abraham and Moses. They had no Scriptures to guide their faith, just the oral stories of their ancestors and their own stories of God’s deliverance from Egypt. They had no laws or rules to govern life together. They were Hebrew people searching for an identity. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, the Hebrews became the nation of Israel. There they who were no people became the Lord’s people, and integral to shaping their new identity were these words of the Lord brought down from the mountain by Moses: the commandments of God for their lives and for their life together.

Israel has always regarded those commandments, not as a burden or set of restrictive rules, but as a gift from God. They set out the limits within which the people live together as God’s people in covenant with God and with one another. These were not suggestions by Moses for their life together; these were God’s commandments for God’s people, commandments they were to obey! They seem simple enough, but are they?

The first three commandments establish limits for the community in relationship to God. The first commandment is often reduced to “You shall have no other gods before me”, but the first words of the first commandment are these: “*I am Yahweh your God*.” The god of the people of Israel is a particular god – *Yahweh (the Lord)* – the God who delivered the people from bondage in Egypt. This commandment is not a broad statement about believing in a higher power or divine being; it is an affirmation of faith in a specific god whose holy name was revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush. One of the pillars of this covenant community is thus claiming and being claimed by this God who is Yahweh, the Lord, a particular God for a particular people. There is room for no other god!

The second and third commandments describe our relationship with that God. God is far too great to be depicted by any earthly idol. Idols are taboo, for they are vain attempts to limit a limitless God in order to satisfy our desires for an object of devotion. We trust in the presence of an invisible God even though we can see no divine likeness or face. Any idol or likeness of a god is no God at all! We worship nothing in creation; we worship the Creator! The Lord also refuses to be manipulated by humans who invoke God’s name. The third commandment is not really a ban on swearing, though profane use of God’s name impugns its holy nature; it is really directed to the intentional use of God’s name for our own purposes. Those who try to validate their agendas by signing the Lord’s name to them violate the commandment. Politicians who close their remarks with “God bless America” in order to score political points, beware! By invoking the name of the Lord for political purposes you are breaking the commandment! Those who swear to tell *the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God* – beware! By invoking God’s name you have upped the ante! These second and third commandments declare that Yahweh alone is God, and we are not to try to impose limits or manipulate God’s name for selfish purposes.

The fourth commandment is perhaps today most often regarded as a suggestion, but is intended as a gift: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*. It is a distinctive practice that defines the community within the larger culture. The Sabbath day was intended as a day of rest from the work of the other six days; even God needed rest on the seventh day! Rest is part of the good creation, and those who live within the covenant community agree to accept that gift and to practice it. At the Royal and Ancient Golf Course at St. Andrews in Scotland, Old Tom Morris insisted that the course be closed on Sundays, saying, “The course needs a Sabbath’s rest even if the golfers don’t.” We 21st century Christians seem no longer to recognize that need for rest yet complain of how busy we are and how hectic the pace of life is. The Sabbath is a gift offered by God, a day of rest to save us from working and amusing ourselves to exhaustion or death!

The last six commandments have to do with our relationships with one another. They urge respect for parents and for life, for marital vows and for others’ property. They demand telling the truth out of respect for the law and not coveting what belongs to a neighbor out of respect for the neighbor. At the heart of these commandments are two commands which Jesus says are the foundation for all the commandments: *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself*. To be a community in covenant relationship with God is to live by that rubric of love, to live by something other than survival of the fittest or the toughest or the richest. It is to respect neighbors – whether friends or enemies - because we all are created in God’s image. We may try to parse the language of the commandments, to question what really constitutes *stealing* or *coveting* or *adultery*; we may try to reinterpret them to suit our own purposes and validate our selfish actions, but in doing so, we forget from whence they came. They are commandments of God, and it is to God that we are accountable for our obedience or disobedience to them. Do you really want to argue to God that you thought they were just suggestions that you could ignore or alter as you like?

These Ten Commandments no longer define us as a people, for it is our faith in Jesus as the Christ, the messiah of God, that forms our identity and shapes who we are and how we live. We now understand the commandments in light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Jesus did not reject the commandments; he reinterpreted them for us, calls us to obey them out of love for God and neighbor, and fulfills the promise of God for the community of God’s people formed by them. We are now a Community of Christ, or as Robert McAfee Brown suggests, *a Community of the Resurrection*. This table is a place where we gather as that community, and this meal is a holy sign of our unity as one people who believe in Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

On this World Communion Sunday we gather at his table to declare that despite all the ways in which we are different or divided, broken or blessed, we are one in Christ. At tables around the world, including the table in your home, bread will be broken and a cup poured in remembrance of him by hands that are large and small, young and old, black, brown, beige, and a multitude of colors among them. Thanks will be given in more languages than we can name, and God will understand them all. For, this table at which we gather is the Lord’s Table; it is the place where the community of Christ gathers because Christ has invited us here to remember him,

to experience his presence with us still, and

to celebrate his promises for us all.

He does not suggest that we come, take, eat, and drink in remembrance of him. He commands us to do so as his disciples, a community formed by faith in the One who sits at the head of the table and says: “love one another!” That is his command. Will you do that? In the midst of this pandemic, will you do as he commands? Amen

1. Martin Luther quoted in *The Ten Commandments*, Patrick D. Miller, Westminster John Knox Press:2009, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)