

St. John's Lutheran, Albany
8 March 2015

3 Lent - B

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

The text for the sermon comes from Ephesians:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of divine grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

What an embarrassment of riches in our readings today: We get that glorious Psalm that we may well remember set to the music of Handel's "Messiah"—"Their sound is gone out into all lands and their words unto the end of the earth." And we get St. Paul's famous discourse on foolishness and wisdom in 1 Corinthians.

And then we get two readings which are somewhat in tension with each other: the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus and John's version of Jesus cleansing the temple. I'll explain in a minute what I mean about in tension with each other. But let's begin by taking a page from Luther today and of how he taught the Ten Commandments in The Small Catechism. First, though, the challenge comes in remembering our Small Catechisms' definitions rather than what legislators who want the commandments printed on public buildings would have us believe.

For starters, let's remember that Luther just wasn't a *thou shalt not* kind of guy. Not when it came to God. In fact, he saved his strongest *thou shalt not*s for the Roman Catholic church.

Remember Katie Luther, the nun who became his wife? Well, he said *thou shalt not* to the church when he began fixing up monks and nuns in marriage and writing about the need for conjugal companionship. On top of all that, he didn't mince words about sex: people need that closeness, he declared, because closeness is God's blessing and God's plan for humanity. Celibacy? It's unnatural.

He said *thou shalt not* to the Roman Catholic Church when he began sharing the wine, as well as the bread, with the laity—the wine having previously been reserved only for ordained priests. Why should the people be denied any part of the Lord's supper when the Lord himself said 'given for you and for all people'?

He said *thou shalt not* to the Pope and was twice excommunicated. Twice! Figure that one out. But Pope Leo X, who called Luther a "a wild boar" who had invaded the vineyards of Christ, was *not* a fan.

But for all his *thou shalt not*s directed at the Pope and the Church, when it came to the 10 Commandments, Luther used his Small Catechism to exhort the faithful that, in addition to what thou may not do, it is equally, perhaps more so to pay attention to this: Thou *cannot*.

For each "thou shalt not" Luther offers an arresting "thou *cannot*."

Because for Luther—and still, I believe, for us—the Ten Commandments were not simply a moral checklist. The most important thing about the law is not that we ought to fancy ourselves able to keep it. Rather it's that we ought not make God's love contingent on human action: that if we behave well enough, God will love us. And if we don't, God won't. Or can't.

You see, the fallacy here is that if we can somehow believe that God is punishing us or judging us when bad things happen, it means that if we behave well enough, if we follow the law to our absolute best ability, maybe bad things won't happen at all. The fallacy of that thinking leads us to believe we've got control of God in some cosmological way.

But a Lutheran understanding of law is different. For Luther the law—in this case, manifested in the Ten Commandments—functions to confront us again and again with the truth that we are not in control. We *cannot* keep the Ten Commandments.

The point of the Ten Commandments, of the law, for Luther, is that it shows us again and again where we are in our lives: people who, despite our lust to play God and make sense, some kind of sense of life, are utterly incapable of righting ourselves in God's eyes. We *cannot* keep the commandments and be good enough to earn God's love. Instead, God's love is simply given to us, given freely.

This is good news, surely. This is soul-soothing, salvific news. We need do nothing. But then—then this good news begs a further question: if we can't be good enough to earn God's love and if God's love is freely given, do we need to try to be good at all?

And that's where the story in John's gospel butts heads with Luther's interpretation of the Ten Commandments. That's where we get the tension.

Now this story of Jesus going into the synagogue and driving out the merchants and the purveyors of goods and the money changers appears in all four gospels. It's obviously important. In John's gospel the temple cleansing appears toward the beginning in Jesus' public ministry, while in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke it appears shortly before his arrest toward the end of his public ministry. But one thing is clear in all four versions: Jesus doesn't want commerce in the house of God. Jesus doesn't want extortion or the violation of religious space. And he's both clear in his message and violent in his expulsion of these people whom he says are violating sacred space.

So there is this odd tension: in Luther's understanding of the Ten Commandments, we are freed from having to uphold the letter of the law as a means of earning salvation. Yet in the gospel, we see Jesus insisting on right action—as he always does, whether it is in regard to the sacred space of the temple or the healing of the sick or the feeding of the hungry or the ministering to the poor. So though we are freed from the law as a means of getting right with God, we are not excused from doing good to one another and condemning injustice when that prevents the propagation of goodness.

So how do we manage a kind of checks and balance system for ourselves? We know we cannot *be* good and we dare not flatter the sinner in us that would lead us to believe we can. At the same time, we are called by the example of Jesus to *do* good in as many ways as we can. And here I am reminded of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley's challenging words:

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

What this says to me is that, even as we are enmeshed in the corporate, imprisoning models of sin out of which we cannot find our own individual way—and we do wrong to think in terms of individual sins, for the most part—yet we are called and equipped as the body of Christ to minimize the extent to which we willingly participate in sinful and hurtful behaviors.

In other words, two things are true for each of us: I am a baptized child of God. As we read in Ephesians—“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

And yet, I am also made for good works, as we further read in Ephesians: “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

So we are called to ask and ponder and work through ethical questions all our lives. We know that doing the right thing will not *save* us. But doing the right thing is how we love our neighbor. And however imperfectly we may do it, we are still called, again and again, to do it.

So that means we wrestle practical questions such as these: Have I done the most I can to minimize my use of earth’s limited resources? Have I tried to support my local economy in meaningful ways rather than be beholden to corporate giants? Do I give what I can of my personal wealth to assist others less fortunate? Are my personal investments made responsibly—and here I point out that as the Council learned when we met with the Fenimore Asset Management group on Tuesday that though are investments are doing well and we benefit from them, we are also heavily invested companies that outsource their labor to countries with non-existent child labor laws, to companies that provide military and IT surveillance, to companies that store hazardous material and others that deal with questionable practices that affect our ecosystem.

You see, it’s hard, if not impossible, to separate ourselves out from this fallen world, this world, frankly, of sin in which sin is no some tidy set of self-improvement resolutions, but is instead something that engulfs and enmeshes us and from which only the redeeming love of God can save us.

And yet we are still called to do goodness to and for one another, both individually and as much as we can in ways that affect the greatest number of people.

We live in the creative tension between being declared righteous by the grace of the God and being called to embody the good and living-giving body of Christ in the world.

In other words, even as we cherish—and I do--Luther’s resounding “Thou *cannot*” when it comes to keeping the law, we are also called to heed our Methodist’s brother, John Wesley’s exhortation to *Do all the good you can/By all the means you can/In all the ways you can/To all the people you can/As long as ever you can.*

That’s because, as the writer of Ephesians reminds us: *we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

Amen.