

Wesley United Methodist Church
October 4, 2020
World Communion Sunday
Scripture: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-17
Psalm 19:1-4, 7-11, 14
Communion Meditationⁱ

“Do you remember the commercial from 1975 about a certain fast-food burger? ... Two all-beef patties... special sauce ... lettuce... cheese...pickles... onions ... on a sesame-seed bun.”ⁱⁱ Even today, I can remember that like it was yesterday. Some things are catchy enough, or we hear them enough that they stay with us for a very long time.

Now, I know we just heard Susan read the passage from Exodus to us, a passage that is known as the Ten Commandments. I remember memorizing them as a youth. I remember legal battles and debates about whether or not the Ten Commandments should be posted in courts and law offices in our country. But I wonder how many of us could sit down and recite all Ten of them and get them in order. Truthfully, I decided to test myself. I remembered 8 out of 10 and had 3 of them in the right order.

The United Methodist Church put out some resources for today, World Communion Sunday, and in their notes was this interesting tidbit. “According to a 2007 article in the Christian post most Americans know their burgers better than they know these commandments. Eighty percent knew about the all-beef patties, but only one person out of 10 recognized ‘Do not kill’”ⁱⁱⁱ as being from the Ten Commandments.

They went on to observe, “These Ten Commandments are foundational documents of our faith. And certainly, this guide to holy living is more satisfying, life-giving and nutrient-rich than fast food.” Jewish faith tradition – and therefore, ours also – celebrated the laws of God as being something precious. Indeed, the psalm we heard said that they are to be desired more than gold and are sweeter than honey. I daresay, that most of us today do not look at law in that way.

But if we remember that these commandments were given to the Hebrew people after they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness. They were given as a framework or a guide of how-to live-in community,

how to live together in freedom. “Each commandment serves to shape our identity as God’s people. Each is a reflection of God’s characteristics. Each individual law reflects God’s desire for justice and forms a moral compass... They provided a way to live with the freedom found in loving God and loving our neighbor. We find liberation in God’s directions about how to live wholehearted lives. We don’t have to figure it out on our own!”^{iv}

Today, on World Communion Sunday, we recognize that these laws, along with the prophets, and Jesus bring us together. When we come together at the table of Holy Communion, we are all loved and valued by God. I would suggest to you, that these laws are basic and important for our lives, all the time, and maybe especially when we live in a time that seems to lack moral authority and a moral compass.

Through the years people have tried to expand on what these commandments say. Some of that is because we now face situations that those who lived during biblical times could not even imagine. We try to go beyond the simple rules of the commandments and live into the spirit of them. Jesus did some of that. Throughout the New Testament, and particularly in Matthew’s Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus saying things like, “you have heard it said ... but I say to you.” He was never contradicting the law, but rather expanding it to make it fit even more with what we know about God’s great love for us and God’s desire for all people to live together in love and in peace. In fact, he says that he did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it.

Let’s think about this for a minute, think about how we need to hear these words today. Take, for instance, the very first commandment. “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.” It sounds reasonable, doesn’t it. If someone saved you from slavery surely you would give that someone your highest honor and respect.

The reality, however, is that we often have many things that we put ahead of God, and many different ways that we think of God – ways that become God to us. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a retired Elder in our conference, shared a meditation this week on these words. He wrote, “No other god, not the one who judges you, not the one who needs for you to look good or do well, not the one who makes you need

something you don't have, not the one who goes around beating up everyone you don't like. No – just the One who sets you free

“No other power, no other fixation, no other highest value, no other reason – only the One who has brought you up out of whatever tight spot you were in, whatever stuck place, whatever cellar-hole, the fear that enslaved you, the ego that ruled you, the shame that bound you – the One who frees you from that.

“And not the one who makes you think you're the only one. Worship the one, and only the one, who also frees every other human being alive. Who insists on such freedom for all their children, all their Beloved. Worship that one alone, and you shall be free.”^v

We are called to worship this God of love, who sets us free from every other god (small “g”) that we give power in our lives. This God sets us free from the gods of status, power, and possessions. This God sets us free from the god of “me first”, “I'm right”. This God transcends all political parties and all ideologies. This God sets us free to be the people God created us to be and to live together with the others that God created.

Many of us watched in frustration, or anger, or disbelief, or whatever other emotion you want to think of as the two people running for the position of President of our country failed to give each other the common courtesy of being able to speak without interruption, without being run over by words. Many of us chose not to watch that debate but could not escape hearing about it. What we saw was behavior that we do not allow from our children.

Sadly, this was only a symptom of the kinds of behavior that we see today in too many places. I think that's why I appreciate the words from our denomination that focused on the Ten Commandments as an invitation for World Communion Sunday. They wrote, “On World Communion Sunday, we live out our faith with life-affirming practices, recognizing the needs of our neighbors and investing in thriving, wholesome, health and long lives. We go above and beyond the basic commandments and live into the spirit of them. We support measures that led to peace, not just as an absence of tension, but as contributors to abundant, remarkable life.”

The day after the memorable and raucous debate I read a devotion from Cameron Trimble that had come out on the day of the debate, but I didn't read it until the day after. I'm glad I read it then because it helped to give me more hope and helped me come back to the place of being centered in God's call to love and life.

Ira Byock is a medical doctor who has written a book called "The Four Things That Matter Most: A Book About Living" In that book, he says that there are four simple phrases that carry enormous power and contain the most powerful words in our language. They are: "Please forgive me," "I forgive you," "Thank you, and "I love you."

Cameron Trimble wrote that he tells "a story of when Sociologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. She reversed the question back to her students. They offered examples of when humans formed tools like shovels, fishhooks, cookware and grinding stones.

"She listened patiently and then said, "these were important advancements, but they do not speak to civilization our ability to live together in authentic community.

"She went on to say that she considered the first signs of civilization in an ancient culture to be a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal world if you break your leg, you die. You can't run from danger. You can't find food. You can't access water. You become the prey. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

"A broken femur that has healed suggests that someone has taken the time to stay with the fallen one, has bound and treated the wound, has carried that person to safety and has cared for that person during recovery.

"Healing someone through difficulty is the beginning of a civilized culture."

Trimble goes on to say, "Every global religious leader and every religion has named how we care for the most vulnerable among us as the highest calling, the one closest to God's heart. As we consider our future as nations and a global community, may we find it in ourselves to value care for the common good, a more powerful motivator than concern for self. It's only then that we will find our way through to better days."^{vi}

As we share in communion, as we live our lives daily, may we take the time to remember and study the Ten Commandments and the words of Jesus. May we see

God's ways as more to be desired than gold and sweeter than honey. May we seek to live our lives so that together we will find our way through the difficult times in which we are living and come through as people who love each other, who seek to live in the ways that God calls us to live with love, peace, compassion, and hope for each all people.

Let us pray:

Loving God, open our hearts, and minds, eyes and ears to your word throughout our day. Help us focus on your love for all of humanity and help us to be instruments of that love wherever we find ourselves. May your words be more familiar to us than the ingredients of a burger and may we be nurtured by them in ways that sustain us in the days and weeks ahead. May we also be those who help to sustain others, offering your words of hope, promise, and love. Amen.

ⁱ Some of this, comes from the World Communion Sunday Sermon Starter from UMC, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/world-communion-sunday-pastor-and-leader-kit>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v Garnaas-Holmes, Steve. "No other God" in his daily meditation "Unfolding Light" 9/28/2020

^{vi} Trimble, Cameron "Signs of a Civilization" in her meditation "Piloting Faith" 9/29/2020