

The God Who Won't Let Go (III): A Law to Lead

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Exodus 20:1-17

Recently I read a news feature that profiled a thirty-something young man's spiritual quest which moved him from a Roman Catholic upbringing to the Jewish religion of his grandparents. His search brought him into contact with relatives he didn't know he had. He learned different behaviors and ritual practices, a new language and culture. He found himself going back through his entire life, seeing the events with new eyes, interpreting them now from the perspective of Judaism. Yet sometimes he felt almost fraudulent—like an imposter whose appearance masked a hollow center. He looked with envy at Jewish friends who seemed perfectly at home with the Hebrew Scriptures, with temple worship, and Sabbath observances with which he struggled. Then one night he heard an elderly rabbi reflect on what keeps a Jew faithful. It was not the answer he expected. The rabbi said, "God will not let us go."

Suddenly the young man realized that the religion he thought he had "chosen" was not so much a "choice" he had made. Rather, *he* had been chosen. Long before he was even aware of the options open to him, before he had made the conscious decision to search, God had held a claim on him. "It isn't a matter of our choosing whether to give up on God," the old rabbi explained, "It is God who chooses not to give up on us."

We know about God's persistent presence with us through the covenants God made with God's people from the beginning. The Bible is essentially a testimony to God's faithfulness, God choosing us and claiming us as God's beloved sons and daughters. *I make my covenant with you, and your descendents and every living thing*, God promised Noah and pointed him to the rainbow arcing the rain-clouded sky. *I will be your God and you will be my people*—and things were never the same again for Abraham and Sarah who named the child of their old age "Laughter"-----not a bad assessment of the surprise and joy in store for you when you pay attention to God's Word.

In contrast to God's faithfulness, however, the human side of the relationship was fairly dismal. The people suffered from amnesia, continually forgetting about God's rule and way. They were self-absorbed and forever pursuing gods like money, power, and status to make them look even better. They resorted to violence in response to their fear, hurting themselves and each other. So once again, God reached out to remind the people of divine love and to call them back to a relationship of fidelity and trust. Fresh from their liberation from slavery in Egypt, on the threshold of entering the promised land, the people received a covenant from God through Moses based on law. At the heart of this law is the Ten Commandments, which we will read responsively. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Exodus, in the twentieth chapter at the first verse.
[SCRIPTURE READ RESPONSIVELY]

Plain and simple. Direct. Clear. The Ten Commandments are nothing if not straightforward, unlike so many directives today. Someone has observed that if Moses had gone to law school and then to Capitol Hill-- rather than Mt. Sinai—we would still get the Ten Commandments, only they'd have 642 earmarks, nineteen exceptions, and a saving clause.

Well. On the one hand, the Ten Commandments are so obvious. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't cheat. Don't lie. If Bernard Madoff would have simply obeyed the Ten Commandments. . . .! I can't tell you how many times I've heard them cited as the gold standard, the rule to live by, the solution to all the woes in our society that seem to stem from a lack of moral clarity or moral will. I was surprised—and not in a good way--when one of you commented that you had not heard a sermon about the Ten Commandments from this pulpit in a long time. Is the church falling down on its responsibility to offer moral guidance to its members?!

As I've pondered the text this week, I keep bumping up my personal resistance to this covenant of law, and have been trying to figure out why. I'm not an anarchist!—and I fully appreciate the need for societal controls and a rule of law. I've read research suggesting that baby boomers in particular chafe at the idea of obedience to the law, and I know what they're talking about! We're more apt to “question authority.” We tend to value coloring “outside the lines” on ethical issues. Laws are meant to be bent, re-defined, applied differently depending upon the situation. The Ten Commandments may be simple, but do they really work in all circumstances? At times,

life seems too complex to fit neatly into those boxes. I vividly recall, for example, a church member of deep faith struggling with the decision to end life support for his terminally ill mother. He wanted to honor what he knew had been her desire for quality of life, while at the same time, seeking every means to preserve that life. The fifth commandment or the sixth commandment????

Friends, God's law is neither a set of divinely-imposed commandments designed to keep us in line, OR a totem warding off evil—as if their being displayed in our classrooms and courtrooms would cause people to behave better. If only it were that simple!

The law of God—exemplified in the Ten Commandments---is another way God has reached out to God's confused and troubled people. We—no less than the Israelites-- wander in a wilderness of self-absorption, idolatry, and violence. They are God's gift to humanity to show us the way, to lead us and illumine our path through a world of competing interests, complicated relationships, and plenty of gray areas. God gave the Ten Commandments not as a burden to weigh us down, but as a gift of grace to free us; not something that diminishes the good life, but that makes the good life possible. The commandments are an affirmation of our relationship with the One God we worship and serve, a God whose love for us animates our love for God and for one another.

What we call “the law,” Jews call “Torah,” which means “the way,” or literally, “the finger pointing the way.”

[William Willimon, God's Good Way, from Pulpit Resource, p. 50] God points the way toward life lived purposefully and joyously; a life not lived alone, but in relationship with God and in community with others.

Biblical scholars sometimes point out that the covenant of law God made with Moses is contingent upon their compliance with it. *If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples [Exodus 19:5]* Unlike the unconditional promises made through Noah and Abraham and Sarah, here God asks for a response of faithful obedience. Observe these rules and you will live well. As members of the covenant community, obedience to God's law is our responsibility. Yes, the Ten Commandments are still binding for us. But God sets no condition upon God's essential love for us, disobedient children though we be. Augustine put it well: It's not that we keep God's commandments first and that then He loves, but that he loves us and then we keep his commandments. The law convicts us of error, but it also provides us with a means of grace by which to live as imperfect people in an imperfect world. Not a loophole, but a safety net to catch us when we fall.

That's why at the center of our community life you will not find an image of stone tablets but a cup. When we break the law, we break ourselves. It doesn't take a spectacular example like Bernard Madoff for us to see the resultant painful, destructive consequences. We know them all too well. But God's love has been poured out upon us, healing and reconciling us, and restoring us to the covenant community. We

experience that renewed possibility through the One who embodied God's law, in Jesus Christ who fulfilled it perfectly. In his light, our attempts at self-justification are revealed to be wholly inadequate to provide relief from the consequences of our choices and actions.

I feel so deeply my own inability to keep the covenant of law. I need a power beyond my own will to obey my Lord who calls me to love enemies, to tell the whole truth, to give without calculation, to seek above all God's kingdom. I know I need the faith community to teach and support and yes, hold me accountable. I know I need. . . . Jesus.

Maybe the Ten Commandments have a saving clause after all. Finally it is not simply about blind obedience, but about remembering who is calling us to obey. The God of love, the God of grace, the God who simply won't let us go, or abandon us to those little inadequate gods which can't possibly save us. "Abide in me," said Jesus, and in him we have a prayer of becoming law-abiding people. In him we learn that the rule of law is the rule of love, and in him we are led, little by little, day by day, choice by choice, to keep it. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor