

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Why Play By the Rules?”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

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.

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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

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

Matthew 22 15-22, 34-40

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” 21They answered, “The emperor's.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

He then is asked questions by the Sadducee about resurrection. When he answers it and the crowds are amazed...then he goes

on to say:

34When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Will you pray with me? Holy one, holy God, you are here within this place. Open our hearts. Open our minds to struggle with the word you lay before us today that we might grow ever more faithful to you. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

I saw an interesting quote on Facebook this week. It said, "The only clear line I draw these days is this - when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor." And that really stuck with me. To me, it's the sum of the life of Jesus in terms of how he lived out that life here on earth, whether with his disciples or strangers he met on the road or even those he challenged. It was about how to live out one's faith in relationship with God and one another. It wasn't really about minute theological arguments or rule-following that was detrimental to relationships, but that didn't sit well with those in power in his day.

Jesus threatened their understanding of the faith, of the rules, of the importance of cleanliness, and the role of tradition. But for Jesus, when the rules impinged upon helping or serving others, whether it was the Samaritan helping the injured man by the side of the road or picking grain on the Sabbath to feed hungry disciples or speaking with a Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus chose helping people over sticking to the rules. And in today's reading we see that common pattern--people of power out to get Jesus. Matthew represents three different power groups wanting to trick him, first, the Pharisees along with the Herodians to entrap him with questions about taxes. They act like they're curious, but they're really malicious, and Jesus knows it. Then, the Sadducees ramp it up by asking "When a person dies and that person has been married to more than one other person, who is their spouse in the afterlife?" Then, the Pharisees come at it again by saying, "Tell us just what is the most important commandment?" And his answer is a summing of the law - God, neighbor and self.

For Jesus, life in faith is about relationships, one's relationship with God, with the self, and with the neighbor. There are similar sentiments expressed in a book called *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart*, which I know some of you have read and discussed this book. Well-known author, Joan Chittister, addresses the commandments we heard this morning from three different angles in the book, one as they were originally viewed, one as they were shaped over time, and she explores their meaning for us today. She points out that these are not a list of rules that you check off and you're good with God. For Chittister, the commandments are a foundation for daily living in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. These commandments, though, are not to be confused with the 613 laws that the Jewish people were asked to follow regarding clothing, food, and aspects of keeping clean. These are about relationships. Thus, the Ten Commandments are more than a rule book. They are a call to be in community. They persist as a framework, a common understanding of what is right and faithful behavior reminding us that the way in which we treat God and others does matter, and they should shape our lives. That's

why the author calls them laws of the heart. If we are in relationship with God and believe we honor God, we must recognize that we are to honor others. For we are all made in the image of God. We know from various parables and the things that Jesus said and did that neighbor is meant to encompass all people--the poor and the wealthy, those who were considered real Jews and those who were not such as the Samaritans, those who we like and those who irritate us, those of our nation and those of other nations. Neighbor really then knows no boundaries. It is about how we treat one another as human beings. It all sounds easy, but if we're honest, we sometimes will admit that it is challenging because, at the core of this challenge, it's not about how we treat those we love most deeply, but how we treat those we may not like or those we are uncomfortable with because they are different.

Someone from this congregation taught me about that in a profound way, and I've shared that story with some of you. Janet Johnson, was a smart, no-nonsense, say it like it is person. When she died, I sat with her family and they shared some parts of her story that I did not know. She had welcomed a very difficult teen into her home when she was kicked out by her parents. There was a seminarian who lived with them that was very hard to get to know, but she knew he was lonely, and so she persisted.

Janet understood that loving a neighbor does not mean your spouse or child or close friends, but anyone, that while each person is different and some are more difficult than others, she felt that God was calling us all to treat each person with respect and compassion. And they said that she had told them that that had really made an impact on her from what she had once read a newspaper article. The article was now brittle and yellow, she kept it as a marker in her Bible. It was about a nun who publicly called out the actions of a very well-known person. And someone chastised the nun and said, "You're supposed to love your enemies." And she said, "I love him, alright, but I don't like him one bit." And Janet's family said she lived that out for the rest of her life. When someone irritated her or angered her, she'd say to her family, "I love them, but I sure don't like them."

The article contained some powerful words that clearly spoke to Janet. The writer said "anyone can learn to love what they like, but the love that is spoken of from the prophets is love of those we do not especially like or maybe even dislike. Love is an act of will and all are worthy of the same treatment. Loving the other is not a sentimental thing. It is an imperative of faith."

Even in the moments when we are faced with someone who drives us crazy, Janet reminds us that we are to see them as a brother or sister in Christ. She understood that loving her neighbor was an essential part of faith, that there were times when her feelings about someone else had become a stumbling block. But then she would remember we are called to love one another. We don't have to like everyone. And I don't know about you, but I have to admit that there are times when Janet's statement is both a challenge and a source of comfort.

The commandments then shape relationships with God, those we love and even those we may not like. It is important for us to remember that, because our faith is not something we live out alone. We are called to live and be in community, and it's reflected in the sacraments we celebrate. Baptism, includes the individual, the congregation, the pastor, often the family and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Baptism, like a wedding, is not just about that moment, that ceremony, that time when we are touched by the waters. It's the beginning of a lifelong commitment to be a part of and to belong to another, to a community throughout our lives and that the way we live that out is by serving others and in so doing, we serve God.

Communion is also an act of community. We share in a meal around a table, whether literally or by the spirit. Jesus' whole life in ministry was about relationships, the parables, the dinner gatherings, the moments of teaching and healing. All of those moments were about relationships and people. Faith, then, is a call to be in relationship not only with those we know, but those we do not really know, those we like and those we may not, those who are like us and those who are different, those who have all their daily needs met and those who do not. To share in life and faith is to share love through acts of service and compassion and building community. And sometimes we may even be surprised. When we discipline ourselves to treat others with respect, even those who irritate us, we may find that our feelings change by our interactions and our time together.

As I thought about all the changes that have come about in this last year, a year that changed so much about how we're in community in new and different ways. For some of us, it has become very challenging and more difficult. And in the midst of that, very small kindnesses and sharing can make such a difference. We have been learning new things about others and how to serve and to be together in different ways.

This brought to mind a book I've been reading. It's called *The Four Winds*, by Kristin Hannah, who wrote *The Nightingale*. The main character is a woman named Elsa. She grew up lonely, even though she had a family. She had been ill as a child with rheumatic fever and treated as fragile and weak. She felt really that she was tolerated, not loved. She suddenly finds herself thrust into a marriage because she is pregnant with a child from a man who she met by chance and only spent a little time with. They get married and she cares deeply for her new husband, but his family is not so welcoming. Over time, her mother-in-law teaches her how to cook and to make a life there on the farm, tending the gardens and the animals. And she grows in skills and confidence because she feels she belongs. Because over the years, her in-laws accept her and then love her and come to care for her deeply, just as she does for them. She's found welcome, a true home, and meaning there on the farm.

The difficult years come, the years of the Dust Bowl and the Depression. The rains stop, the crops dry up and the animals begin to wither. Not even watering the small garden makes a difference. Her husband suddenly leaves the family to go west where everybody else is going in those difficult times. Many businesses in town close and the people lose their farms.

Then come the dust storms, merciless, unrelenting. They wear cloth masks and wet tablecloths, sitting under dining room tables, waiting out storms that sometimes last for days. But then Elsa's son falls ill with a lung infection from the dust, and she knows that they must leave for the survival of her child. So, her in-laws send her forth with her children with blessings and prayers, and she and her children make their way to California.

Life there is not easy. Many are in the same boat. Migrants from other states trying to find a way to survive. The people of California are not very welcoming, and they are not even welcome in the local churches. But difficult as that story is, she tells us of moments of community that help her. Kind of sacramental communion-type moments that are sources of hope.

When they finally arrive in California, they settle in an encampment outside of the town where many, many other people have come to camp. That first night, a man and a woman and family come to their tent to meet them. The

man hands her one potato and says it is not much, but we want to welcome you. Elsa is deeply touched. She feels a sense of connection she has not felt in days. It was a meager gift, but it held so much meaning. This family welcomed her. They didn't treat her with condescension like so many others had along the way. They make her feel as if she and her family belong, and they mattered. The weeks unfold and the two families become very close. They find joy in the music that others share in the camp and watching people support one another. Finally, the day comes when she finds a job, and she can buy food and brings home an offering to them in return. They gather, a family of friends who share not only the challenges of life, but what little they have, and they create community. That sense of crossing boundaries, of redefining neighbor, of being aware of the importance of seeking out peace and reconciliation and community is profound.

I found myself moved by the words of Pope Francis this week on his visit to Iraq as he walked in the places where Abraham is thought to have been,. Abraham, the patriarch of three important strands of faith, but also a place where there has been so much violence and bloodshed in the name of God. The Pope came seeking to create unity in the midst of diversity. Clearly he lives out a broad and inclusive sense of neighbor. He said, "only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family, will we be able to begin a process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world." Indeed, faith is about relationships and community. The Trinity alone should be a reminder of that, for we worship God, who is one yet inextricably three. Rules of community are best lived out when they are seen as a way to form and maintain relationships. They are about treating all people with dignity and compassion; about sharing what we have, so all may be fed; about ways of relating to others in order to build a foundation for everyday living. It is about relationships, not maintaining rules at all cost.

That is the gift we are offered each time we gather around the table. Each time we offer some small thing that makes another's life more bearable, each time we offer a healing touch, a kind word and acknowledgement of another person as a human being who is a beloved in the eyes of God, this is what gives our lives meaning and purpose. It is what can hold us together and does hold us together. It is what makes us the people of God. Amen.