

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 8, 2015; the 3rd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22.

Commandments as Power for Life

In the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, men from the government come to talk to Professor Indiana Jones...they are trying to find the ark of the covenant containing the tablets with the Ten Commandments...they want to have the power of the Ark under their control, rather than letting the Nazis have it.

I think I was 12 when the first *Raiders* movie was released; this movie did two things for me...it gave me the most of the information I had about the Ten Commandments, which of course was not a lot, and also caused me to want to be an archeologist...a desire that stayed with me for a number of years.

The government men don't seem to know much about this ark and the Ten Commandments, and Indiana Jones asks them, "Didn't you guys ever go to Sunday School?"

Well, the children in our Sunday School were studying and discussing the Ten Commandments just last week.

A study guide gave them these words of God in words they could understand and consider: 1. Put God first; 2. Worship only God;

3. Use God's name with respect;

4. Remember God's Sabbath;

5. Respect your parents;

6. Don't hurt others;

7. Be faithful in marriage; 8. Don't steal; 9. Don't lie;

10. Don't be envious of others.

Knowing what the Ten Commandments are is important for a number of reasons.

We prayed the Decalogue today, and after every commandment we said, "Amen. Lord have mercy." yes, may it be so, and have mercy because we know we do not always get these right.

In the movie, everyone is searching for the ark with the Ten Commandments because they want the power of God for themselves,
Their purpose...a dubious plan to be sure, does not work out as they had hoped.

Thankfully, we do not have to go on an archeological dig to access God's power given to us in the Ten Commandments.

And there is power in God's commandments to us; it is power to help us know how to relate to God and each other.

There is nothing magical about it; it takes consistent devotion to God and attention to the spiritual resources given to us, as well as a curiosity about what these commandments mean for us in our time.

What do we think about the Ten Commandments?

Did you memorize them when you were growing up?

Have you thought much about them since that time?

The specifics of the words are important, but memorizing them is not enough; we need to dig into them, see behind them, and around them, what is related, and how they relate to us.

First what is the macro-message?

...the big picture that enable us to call these words God's gift to us and power for our lives?

In part, it is the power to see what really matters.

Knowing God's love, care, grace, and then making a response, that is what

the Ten Commandments are all about.

We hear God say, as a preface to the commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....”

The One giving you these commandments is God who freed you from oppression...this is the God who seeks to give you life even when all around you is death.

As the people waited in the desert to enter the promised land, God was trying to prepare them for their new lives of freedom.

Take the Ten Commandments and consider how they apply to your life, to your circumstances...who God is for you and who you are seeking to be for God.

How do we put God first?

What other things in our lives seem to vie for our attention...potential idols?

How well are we doing observing Sabbath time in our busy world?

But of course this is not as much a list of do's and don'ts as it is a way of putting all of life in context...a context in which our attentiveness to God and our actions in the world, the way that we relate to others, is connected.

Craig Kocher in his commentary puts it well:

“There is an internal logic to the commandments that is both compelling and beautiful: The way we attend to our God (tablet one) shapes the way we attend to our neighbor (tablet two).

In other words, faithful worship of God leads to proper love of neighbor. Proper praise of God shapes our social responsibility; good theology is good ethics.

For example, having ‘no other gods before me’ means that money, sex, and power will not wiggle their way into the altars of our lives, and thus will not be used to exploit others.

Keeping the Sabbath is a reminder that all of creation is a gift and we have a responsibility to be wise stewards of it (v.8).

Honoring father and mother reminds us that we are not self-made, that we stand on the shoulders of others.”¹

This weekend we honor our mothers and fathers who fought for civil rights for all in this nation as we remember Selma on the 50th anniversary of the events of that time, which had large role in bringing about the voting rights act of 1965.

We honor them by continuing to seek justice for all in our nation and in the world, as it depends on us.

Following God’s commandments and taking them seriously might cause us to offend some, challenge some...we are not called to be passive.

Jesus showed us this.

In the 12th chapter of Mark’s Gospel we hear was Jesus speak about the commandments. “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’

Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Jesus gives the Shema, and then says ‘The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

There is no other commandment greater than these.’

As Jesus goes about his life, we see what those commandments look like in action, in context, for him in his time and place.

When Jesus saw the commerce happening in the Temple, he was angry.

So often people try to push away anger or try bury it within themselves.

I think some are taught that as Christians we should not get angry; we

¹ Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown., General Editors. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Epub. Craig Kocher, 3rd Sunday in Lent, Loc. 2847 of 19547.

should always be loving and understanding.

Well, sometimes being loving and compassionate means that we will be angry with we see injustice or hurtful behavior.

“Don’t be angry” is not one of the Ten Commandments.

Anger, like all of our emotions, gives us insight into what is going on, with us and with our world, and being real about what we feel inside helps God to meet us there.

God is already waiting for us there, in what is real, in what is now, in this moment.

So all emotions can help us; we can befriend them, even when they scare us, even when we have tapes running in our minds that say, “you shouldn’t be angry.”

Emotions are neither good nor bad...they just are.

It is never sinful to have a feeling...what we do next...that is when a moral/ethical choice may be involved.

Considering the situation with Jesus in the Temple...Jesus is angry.

Jesus is angry, and he acts.

Some have used this account in the Gospels to justify all sorts of violence, but what Jesus does in a non-violent action, yes it does involve making some commotion, but no person is injured.

Anger can be a righteous response to situations that are just wrong or not fair or unjust.

Jesus saw the money changers as offending against God because they were not treating the people fairly in their dealings.

Perhaps Jesus was angry about the entire Temple system of requiring people to exchange their money for coins without the Emperor’s image before being able to by the required bird or animal for the required sacrifice.

This was a system supported by the religious authorities, but Jesus indicates that it is a practice that distracts people from God.

This was a system that had been in place for a long time, but Jesus

challenged it because it does not go with the commandments of God that he knew...the commandments gave him power to act, knowing that he was about the work of God in the world.

During this season of Lent, we have been considering a theme, I have been suggesting that a way of approaching or viewing Lent---that it can be seen as a time of making space for God to plant seeds, seeds of grace that can germinate during Lent so that by Easter we are seeing some real growth.

How do the Ten Commandments make space for God to plant seeds of grace in you in your life?

Is there one that really speaks to you today?

Is there one that you desire to spend some time with, with God?

How can these commandments give you power for life?

Let us pray,

We thank you God for giving us life, and everything that we need to grow in faith, everything that we need to know you more, and to serve you and others, as you would have us do. Help us to love you with all of our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.