

“The Only”

Deuteronomy 5:1-7; Romans 12:1-2;
Ephesians 2:1-10; Matthew 4:10, 5:17-20

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

It would be interesting to ask what is the very first thing that comes to mind when you think about the Ten Commandments. I want to think for a moment about the context in which those commandments were received.

When you read scripture, there are always people going on a journey. Last week we heard about Abram going on a journey, trusting God to take him somewhere new. Throughout the Old Testament we hear of journeys. We hear of the journey when Joseph journeys to Egypt and then Jacob and his sons end up there. Then we hear the other end of that journey, when God comes to take them out of bondage and take them on the journey of the Exodus, one of the archetypical journeys of human life, a journey out of bondage into a new place, into a new hope, into a new land.

We can think about how there are many more journeys, but that Jesus' coming is an invitation into a new journey, to renew our faith, to recognize that God sees the human need and comes to be among us. So the birth itself is an invitation. I sometimes think of it as that moment when I recognize that somehow God does indeed love me and is inviting me into a new life, into a trust that I can have.

That also is what happens when the disciples begin to follow Jesus. He invites them to follow him and they go on a new journey. I love the scripture we read last week where the disciples were with John, and he said something incredible about Jesus, “There’s the Lamb of God.” So they start following Jesus, and Jesus turns to them and says, “What is it you want?” They say, “Where do you live?” Jesus says, “Come and see.” It’s an odd exchange, but in a way it’s an invitation. They are invited to come and see where he resides, who he is, his life, and what he’s about.

As we begin to think about what it’s like to follow Jesus, we recognize that God has in many ways entered into the life of God’s people to help us. We have a great story about how the Ten Commandments come to be, and we’re not going to spend a lot of time on that, but it’s a wonderful vision and description that can draw us in.

Sometimes we think about all that God has done before and how he’s done something new in Jesus. But Jesus himself suggests that yes, there is something, in a way, that is new about what’s happening, but really it’s more a fulfillment than it is something completely different. Jesus said, “I didn’t come to abolish the law and the prophets; I came to fulfill them.” We’re going to think about what that means as we work our way through the Ten Commandments. We might think about working through these Ten Commandments by thinking about how they were said then, and how they were restated by Jesus, or how Jesus showed us how he’s fulfilling them and how they have meaning for us and for our lives.

As we begin to think about the Commandments, I have some caveats. One comes out of the Ephesians passage. We're not saved by what we do. There's a temptation as we look at the Commandments to say, as a rich young ruler once said to Jesus, "I've done all the commandments, so what else is there for me to do?" Jesus says, "You haven't left behind your wealth. There's something else you are giving your allegiance to." What he's saying is that it's not just what you do. Again, as Paul says in Ephesians, it's not just what we do. Our works don't save us. God saves us. It's God's grace, and as we trust in that grace, it says, we're made for good works. So God invites us to be the people God created us to be, and shows us the way. That's what this series is about. It's about how God invites us to be those people that God created us to be, to do the good works that God created beforehand for us to participate in.

The second caveat is that part of the way that I change is by the way I think. It's not just thinking, though. Sometimes I think if we can just get the right concept in mind we will change our lives. Some of that happens, but it's really our whole sense of the world, our world view, the way we see things, the way we feel about something, whether we feel like it's right or wrong. Some of that can probably work for us. But I also know that some of what I learned to experience and feel doesn't fit with what God shows me is right and good. So through the experiences of my life I began to have this world view, this perspective, this almost innate reaction to the world. Sometimes that needs to be transformed and changed. I need a new way of perceiving, seeing, and being able to grasp. That's what it says in the Romans passage, that we need to let our minds be transformed by the work and the grace of God, and renewed through him. I think that's part of what God is doing when we listen to God's word, as we think together about God's word and the way it works out in our lives.

This is the weekend when we celebrate Martin Luther King, and here is a quote from him that suggests that there is another kind of caveat. He says, "The arm of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." It's the idea of it being long that I was particularly interested in because so often I think that when I've seen something new, I think the whole world should shift and change. Sometimes it's just me that's shifted and I have to live with that same old world even as my living begins to move and change. The world doesn't just change overnight. As we begin to understand that as we let God transform us, we begin to transform the world. Sometimes I wish the world were transformed and I could just live into that transformation.

It's an invitation to begin to hear and follow and go on a journey, and it might be a long one, because Jesus came not to abolish what had come before, but to fulfill it, to change the direction. One of the things that has shifted in my view of this particular passage was as he finished with saying, "Your righteousness has to be greater than the scribes and Pharisees." I used to take that as meaning that I had to live the law out better than anybody else so I can be better than the scribes and Pharisees. That seems counter to exactly what he's trying to say. I realized again that, if we think of righteousness as living in right relationship, what he's suggesting is that perhaps the scribes and Pharisees lived out the letter of the law as best as human beings could do, but their relationship with God's people was not always that good. They were pretty

judgmental. Other times, Jesus talks about them as physicians who simply add to others' burdens. I began to see that when Jesus says he's fulfilling the law, he's trying to help me see the purpose of the law not as the letter of the law, but as the full purpose of it, and that is to guide us into right relationship. In fact, one of the commentators on the Ten Commandments suggested that they are recommendations for good society. I think they are a little bit more than that, but there's a sense of shifting away from something that we're going to break to something we try to live out because they help us do the good work that God has created for us to do.

So where do we start? Let's start with the first commandment. It's the way Jesus responded to Satan, the tempter. He said, "When I am tempted to bow down to you, when I am tempted by the power of the world, the first thing I want to remember is that I serve God and worship only him." That's the first commandment—have no other gods before me. It's an interesting place to start. I feel like it's a very hard place to start today because it feels in so many ways our world has dismissed God, as if we don't need God. And yet, when we see a moment of grace, when we feel the recognition of God's love for us, when we see the complexity of the world and wonder at what God has created and feel a moment of grace, these experiences invite us to begin with God.

The Bible Project suggests that God is that self-giving, divine, creative being. I don't know exactly how we want to think about God, but to think of one that is beyond us, transcendent, beyond our ability to understand yet as close as our breath as we breathe in and out. How might it transform our minds if we begin to think in our daily lives that, yes, there is a God? How we might remember when we see a moment of beauty that, yes, there is a God? When we see someone help someone else and recognize the love and grace that is in that act, we say yes, there is a God. It is so easy to make decisions without thinking about God, to live our lives as if there is no God. Most of society around us suggests that is what we do. How does our life begin to change when we try to remember God with us?

In Sunday School today, I was reminded that there is a group in the Eastern Orthodox Church that tries to take Paul's suggestion that we pray constantly almost literally. They have a prayer—God, have mercy on me, a sinner—and they just pray that over and over and over again. The idea is that as I remember the grace of God in my life and the humility with which I come to God, I am able to remember that God is with me, that God's grace is what shapes and forms and leads me through life.

So as we go into this new week, I challenge you to think about ways you can notice or remember or claim God's presence, God's reality, God's gift of grace in your life. It's so easy to notice what's wrong in life. Can we notice where God is? Can we notice the gifts of God? Those moments of beauty? Those moments of grace? Those moments of encouragement? The wonder at the complexity? The wonder of life itself? We can try to live this life remembering God present, remembering God is first and there is no other God. Amen.