

Rule Bound

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 October 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 18A

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; “*Three things to remember*” by Mary Oliver;
Gospel: Matthew 21: 33-46

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

“Three things to remember” by Mary Oliver:

As long as you're dancing, you can break the rules.
Sometimes breaking the rules, is just extending the rules.
Sometimes there are no rules.

Like Mary Oliver, those of us who grew up in the sixties and seventies have complex reactions to a list of laws or rules like the Ten Commandments. Who's telling me what I can and cannot do? Why? Why shouldn't I do this? Do these rules still apply?

The negative formulation of the commandments in terms of “*thou shalt not*” is a problem for Christian public relations. Doesn't it seem that secular society sees Christianity as consisting of a list of things we should not do?

The overwhelming public message of Christianity to Australia today is “*thou shalt not be homosexual.*” *And if thou art homosexual, thou art definitely not going to be blessed with the social recognition and legal protections of marriage.*

But, questioning the rules, questioning authority, is part of what it is to be a thoughtful, reflective human. However, my experience in moderating the “Australian Christians for Marriage Equality” Facebook page is that many Christians claim that the rules are unchangeable and that even to question the rules is sinful. Those of us who have been running the page are called ‘*wolves in sheep's clothing*’, leading God's children astray with false teaching. In interpreting scripture and inviting people to look at Hebrew and Greek words and roots and meanings and questioning conventional translations of the texts that are used to condemn, we are considered to be guilty of law breaking and we are frequently told that God will cast us into the pit of eternal fire.

Sadly, unquestioning adherence to rules, to keeping the commandments of a wrathful God whose key message is “*thou shalt not*”, also characterises the way many secular people understand Christianity today. I have been surprised to read comments by atheists telling us that we cannot be Christian and support marriage equality because our sacred texts are abundantly clear in their denunciation of homosexuality. Some atheists and most fundamentalist Christians have suggested that if we question the Bible on this teaching, we should stop calling ourselves Christian.

So, on this Sunday morning in the springtime of 2017, how do we, as people who seek to follow the way of Jesus, engage with these ancient commandments?

We begin by examining what we know of how they were received and understood by the ancient Israelites and later by the early Christians.

They are framed as a list of things that people should not do – because this is the way that ancient laws were written in the Ancient Near East.

We often prefer Jesus' shorter expression of the commandments: *Love God and love your neighbour as yourself*. But Jesus did not invent these commandments. They were not contradictions of Jewish teaching that he had inherited. Jesus was quoting from other parts of Hebrew scripture: from Deuteronomy 6: 5 and Leviticus 19:18.

I think it's easier for us to hear the Ten Commandments as expressions of hope – such as we sung in Bill Wallace's Hymn.

Another way of expressing it might be to think of them in terms of our hope for life lived in harmony with the Sacred:

- May our lives centre on God and God's will for us.
- May we understand that God cannot be captured and made to serve us.
- May we have respect for the Sacred.
- May we be mindful of God's creative power and refreshed to participate as co-creators.
- May we care for others as God has cared for us.
- May we have reverence for life.
- May we be faithful to one another and to the promises we make.
- May we have regard for the rights of others.
- May our words be truthful.
- May we enjoy the blessings we receive and share them generously.

Those words (from a prayer litany in *Touch Holiness* edited by Ruth C Duck and Maren C Tirabassi, p. 229 and Bill Wallace's hymn) help us to sense the positive, find what is life giving in the Ten Commandments. Though I think that re-expressing them as positive and aspirational is not sufficient. We also need to face their limitations and their potential to perpetuate understandings of the Divine and of human community that are not life giving.

Many Christians, especially Christians in the United States, regard the Ten Commandments as general statements of how life should be organized and how people should relate to each other. They think of them as basic principles which everyone could agree with and ascribe to.

Exodus 20 gives us a different picture. They are laws given by Yahweh, the God of Israel, on the basis of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people. They are a consequence of the exodus event of liberation from Egypt. In essence, because of what the Deity has done for the nation, they have reciprocal responsibilities in allegiance to the Deity.

The content of the laws raises serious problems in relation to both gender and class. The problem for modern hearers is that we no longer believe in some of the values reflected in these commandments.

1. They reflect a patriarchal society in which slavery was still practiced.
2. The laws are addressed to men. In Hebrew, the "you" to whom the laws are addressed is masculine singular. In other words, these laws specifically are addressed to a man, not to a woman.
3. The tenth commandment stipulates that a person must not covet his neighbour's house, wife, male or female slave, ox or donkey, or "anything that belongs to your neighbour" (v. 17). It is clear from this commandment that the "neighbour" must be a man, since he has a wife. It is also clear that the man's neighbour owns property (human, animal, and land) and that his wife is considered part of that property, as she is listed among house, cattle, land, slaves, and other belongings. The abundance of property mentioned suggests that these laws mainly protected men of wealth.
4. The commandment prohibiting adultery (v. 14) also relates to violation of property rights. In ancient Israelite understanding, adultery was defined as sexual intercourse between a married or engaged woman and a man who was not her husband or her betrothed. The same rules did not apply to men. A married man did not sin against his wife by having extramarital relations, because he did not belong to her in the same way she belonged to him.
5. The commandments also include problematic understandings of human slavery and treatment of non-Israelite people. It is perhaps surprising that the Israelites were slave masters, because these laws open with the declaration that the basis of the divine-human relationship is the Israelites' liberation from slavery. But the Sabbath law (vv. 8-11) indicates that slavery was an acceptable social order. It implies that the Israelites' enslavement by the Egyptians was wrong, but Israelite slave-holding was acceptable.
6. The "neighbour" mentioned in verses 16-17 is also of concern. From other usages of this term, we know that it refers to an individual who is related to one's own ethnic or family group, or is an in-law. These laws speak to how Israelites should relate to other Israelites, but they do not require this treatment of foreign people.
7. The Ten Commandments also raise questions about the character of the God who gave them, who describes God's own nature as jealous. The formula, "*I am Yahweh*," appears throughout Exodus 1-12 as God's motive for liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The stated reason for the Israelites' liberation is so both the Egyptians and Israelites will know who Yahweh is. This fits Yahweh's self-description as "*jealous*" (v. 5). Given the Israelites' understanding of adultery, if God is a jealous husband, and Israel the wayward wife, this suggests that the people were the property of Yahweh, and it could also explain why Moses told the people to "*fear Yahweh*" (v. 20).

These commandments present Yahweh as a deity who liberated a people so that they could be God's property and serve God in exchange. Yahweh, in response, established laws that included protection of the property rights of wealthy men, and regarded women as property.

Given these underlying assumptions of the Ten Commandments, we should indeed be questioning these laws and their applicability to us and to our society. And we should be questioning those Christians who want to make negative, punitive laws the basis of both religious and social order.

It strikes me, reading the commandments, that they are very light on love. They are a powerful statement about placing God at the centre of our lives, and they underscore that in order to live in community, humans have always placed restrictions on freedom.

However, the only mention of "love" refers to God's relationship with humanity and "love" occurs nowhere in the last six commandments, which deal with relationships between people. These last six commandments guide humanity in avoiding exploitation and abuse, but they do not go further to require love, service, commitment, or self-giving.

It is worth noting, at a time when the right wing politicians are undergirding their platforms with a call to give priority to religious rules and dogma, that love is not at the centre of their vision either. Love does not feature in the campaign opposing marriage equality. Love is not a concern of the perpetrators of injustice and abuse against asylum seekers. Love is not on the agenda of drug testing beneficiaries, or the mass incarceration of aboriginal people. Love is not at work in plans to rape the earth for profit and steal the future from our children and grandchildren.

No-one is spending millions of dollars, as the Coalition for Marriage is, to enshrine a religious agenda based on love of God and neighbour. The religious right is not proclaiming Micah 6:8 (about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God). Conservative think tank analysts are not claiming that our laws should be based in Matthew 25:40 ("*As you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me*").

We need to remember what the ten commandments proclaim, and what they do not proclaim.

Naming the issues, the problems, with the Ten Commandments does not however require us to reject out of hand seeds of wisdom that may enrich our community of Jesus' followers.

It's helpful to recognise, that the context of the commandments is one of a time of new beginnings – and there are many times of new beginnings throughout scripture. These are times when values are re-oriented and re-expressed.

After their escape from Egypt, the Israelites faced a new beginning at Sinai. Gone are the days of slavery and exploitation in Egypt. Now the laws provide the Israelites an opportunity to root their new society in the true God, to base it on something other than exploitation.

No more shall the key to success be found in cheating, stealing, and killing. Now the god life will lie in relationship with the true God – and with the community.

As we face new beginnings, political and personal, the story of Sinai reminds us to ask, "Who will be our God?"

Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, has written about some of the seeds of wisdom that we can find in these commandments, inviting us to think about what honouring the Sabbath might mean for us. According to the sacred story of the Exodus (which it is important to say is not a factual history but a re-imagination of periods of war, servitude and expulsion of Semitic people in Egypt), the Israelites were enslaved for 400 years. During that time, the Sabbath became crucial in the maintenance of their identity as God's people. Maintaining the Sabbath embodied a strong statement that God's people resisted a system that exploited and abused them.

Brueggemann says the Sabbath is a "*political assertion of disengagement from the economic system of productivity that never has enough.*" The relevance of the Sabbath to us is not limited to rest, play, and worship – nor to the experience of my grandmother's forebears in Scotland, where the swings got tied up in the playgrounds on Sunday because you shouldn't do anything that was fun. Sabbath observance, instead, makes a forceful political statement that the economic system we live in is broken.

Many people today work in jobs that exploit them by continually demanding more commitment and more time, to the detriment of health and family.

For us, honouring the Sabbath serves as a protest against that system and affirms that the system does not reflect God's will. We express that politically in fighting for penalty rates for people who must work on the weekend, and in advocating for a living wage. We express it personally in choices that work will not define all of who we are, that it will not separate us from family and those we love.

The other commandment that I want to pay particular attention to this morning is the one that prohibits idolatry. The word idolatry sounds archaic to contemporary ears. There are no golden calves these days. The twentieth-century theologian, Paul Tillich, saw that idolatry was alive and well - in the wholehearted pursuit of professional success and economic power and nationalism. We elevate mundane pursuits to the position of gods, "worshipping" them at the expense of everything else. Even our dedication to family, fitness and community involvement can become idols. We centre our faith, and the totality of our potential well-being, on those elements of life that seem to promise us complete fulfilment.

These false gods eventually leave us feeling more hopeless and despairing.

The idol that fills the space where the Sacred should be cannot ever cultivate within us integrity, well-being, or shalom—the sense of being whole and fulfilled—that we desperately seek.

Many of us live in fear that the loneliness, agitation, desperation, and longing that can overtake us have no resolution; therefore, we invest ourselves in temporary fixes, to fill up the space where loneliness, fear, and anxiety reside. Relying on that which is not-God will leave us more lonely, fearful, and desperate when its power evaporates.

So, we can embrace and critique these commandments, remembering that they were not given to burden the people, but so that the people might have freedom - freedom to trust each other and their God. At their best, they were not intended to restrict or deny life, rather to enhance it. It was from this solid base of common care, of common ideals and respect, that God's people would build and change their world, however imperfectly. And it was this faith that shaped the faith of Jesus, who called us to care for the vineyard, to reject the ways of violence, to seek life.

God keeps giving us new opportunities. God is that which calls us to a new beginning, to a new way to seeing, acknowledging, seeking justice and compassion for all people and the earth.

Let us acknowledge the grace of God reaching out to us in this time and place, enabling and empowering us to do what we are called to do: to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.