

Consecration Sunday
The Guide to Neighborliness
Exodus 20: 1-17
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When I was in seminary, I had a chance to hear the The Dalai Lama speak at the University of Minnesota, one of the more memorable religious experiences of my life. He spoke about the Happy Life. He spoke about compassion. He also talked about his practice, meditating for hours a day, contemplating Buddhist texts for hours. He practiced his religion in the same way a professional musician practices an instrument for hours every day, in the same way a professional athlete practices her or his craft and cares for the body for hours every day. In the same way that you can hear greatness at a concert or see physical genius when watching the best athletes in sport, I had the feeling that I was in the presence of a remarkable soul, a centered, well-formed, whole human being, as I was sitting in the same arena listening to the Dalai Lama.

Since then, I've heard the Dalai Lama say, "my religion is kindness." The musician might say that the purpose of all of her or his practice is for the sake of beauty. The professional athlete might say that the purpose of all of her or his practice is for the sake of winning. The Dalai Lama is saying that the purpose of all of his practice is kindness, the hours of meditation, contemplation, intentionally training the mind: kindness - a way of being in the world.

Thinking of this statement again led me to wonder how I, how we, would finish this sentence, "my religion is..." Last spring you had six words for your spiritual memoir, today you only get one. My answer is neighborliness. My religion is neighborliness. It doesn't have the same ring to it as "my religion is kindness," but I'm not the Dalai Lama.

I think everything that we do here, all of our practice, is for the sake of growing in love for the neighbor, getting better at our side of the relationship with people we love, our friends, our actual neighbors in our neighborhood, and importantly, the strangers we have yet to meet, the strangers we will never meet, those who are different than us, those who are less powerful than us. The neighbor includes those who come after us and will receive the world we give them, and those who have gone before us too. The neighbor can stretch to include other creatures in the neighborhood and the earth on which we all depend.

As we dedicate our gifts to God today, we offer our gifts to a Love that is centrally concerned with the health of the neighborhood. We will be formed and shaped by a love that will be growing our love for the neighbor.

During stewardship month, we been talking some about wealth with this emphasis on the neighbor. I've been mentioning this statement by scholar Walter Brueggemann who says that "the memory of Exodus, wilderness, and manna assures that one's wealth will be regarded as a gift to be shared." God delivers the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, an empire with Pharaoh at the center, someone who covets more and more, who never has enough. But God dismantles Pharaoh's economy and empire in the process, and now God needs to build a new nation, a people who live in a different way.

The manna story is the beginning of this project. Bread rains down from the sky, a gift for everyone. There's enough for everyone but the manna must be shared.

The Ten Commandments is a continuation of God's project to build a nation of people who live in a different way. Walter Brueggemann calls the Ten Commandments "rules for honoring and sustaining neighborliness." We may not be fond of the 10 Commandments. We aren't people who like to be commanded to do much of anything, but they are foundational to our faith and our story, and their purpose is to turn us outward and to sketch out a way to live outside Pharaoh's world, to sketch out a different way of life.

I'm going to walk through these commandments quickly and I invite you to listen to them as a guide to neighborliness. The commandments begin with an another invitation to remember Egypt and to remember Yahweh who is different than Pharaoh. Worship the God of generosity and abundance, remember that there is grace. There is enough and this God invites us into a world of sharing.

Brueggemann says that the second commandment is a loud warning against undue attention to commodities that beg for worship. The warning is against possessions moving to a place of ultimate importance, of profit moving to a place of ultimate importance rather than human beings. Rather, what is ultimate is the Love in our midst, drawing us in to heal us, and

then turning us outward towards one another. That's our God. That deserves our attention, and this worship and devotion will keep us on a different path.

The business about God being a jealous God is probably not helpful for us. I hope we will be understanding towards the ancient writers as we hear this. They are clearly trying to get the people to pay attention and take seriously the powerful lure of a return to the ways of Pharaoh. There are plenty of things I have said to get the attention of my children or my congregations that I've wished I could take back, and that I hope people thousands of years from now won't hear or read. Maybe we can focus on the intention and give these writers the benefit of the doubt.

Not making wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God has more to do with the economic transactions that were sealed in the name of God than in what we think of as vulgar language. This is a command about not defrauding your neighbor.

The command to honor the sabbath is about disciplined regular work stoppage. In Pharaoh's world the work never stopped. The Hebrews always had to keep making more bricks, the drive for more production was endless. There was no time for rest, for leisure, for feasting and relationship building, for celebrating the goodness of life and remembering what is most important. Human beings need sabbath. All creatures must rest.

When we feel like we can't possibly stop working because there are so many bricks that have to be made, we are in Pharaoh's world. When we create a situation for our neighbors where they must work all the time, we have recreated Pharaoh's world. God doesn't want this for the neighborhood. We are to do good work, but we must be able to stop, to remember, to be human beings.

The next commandments: honor your elders, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't tell lies: all are critical for the health of the neighborhood.

The last commandment summarizes this guide to neighborliness: don't want or take what belongs to your neighbor. Honor the dignity of other people.

In seminary I was taught to pay attention to beginnings and endings when reading the Bible. The beginning of the Ten Commandments says, worship the God of abundance and generosity, not Pharaoh, and the end says, honor the dignity of your neighbor. That pretty much sums it up, and that's what Jesus says.

To close, I invite you to listen to this paragraph written by the Buddhist Monk Matthieu Ricard in his book on Altruism. This is the beginning of his chapter on "The Spread of Individualism and Narcissism." Interestingly, this book was written in 2013, and Donald Trump is mentioned as an example of narcissism, before Donald Trump was the focus of our attention. What I hear this Buddhist monk talking about is what I think our focus on neighborliness should be creating. He writes:

Our existence, and even our survival, depends closely on our ability to construct mutually beneficial relationships with others. Human beings have a profound need to feel connected, to trust others and be trusted by them, to love and be loved in return. The psychologist Cendri Hutchinson has summarized a number of experiments showing that feeling connected to others increases our psychological well-being and physical health, and diminishes the risk of depression. The feeling of connection and belonging to a wider community also increases empathy and fosters behavior based on trust and cooperation. All this induces a virtuous circle, or more precisely according to one of the founders of positive psychology, Barbara Fredrickson, an ascending "virtuous spiral," since trust and readiness to cooperate are reinforced when they are reciprocal.

Doesn't it seem like so much that is happening in our country, our culture, and our world is a vicious spiral, pulling us downward and farther apart from one another as we spin?

What I hear from this Buddhist monk sounds so similar to our foundational story, our emphasis on neighborliness coming from the ten commandments. The church is a community devoted to the Love in the center of that virtuous spiral. We devote ourselves to that Love and as we give ourselves to it, we give ourselves to others and we add to the spiral, and we share it with others and we draw others into it.

If our religion is neighborliness, all of our practice is for the sake of pulling people together and building the health of the whole neighborhood. As we dedicate our gifts to God

today, we give to the Love that is in the center of this whole way of life. It is in this Love that we place our trust. Amen.