

March 7, 2021

**“What’s He So Mad About”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

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. Six days you shall labor 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.

Honor 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 neighbor.

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

John 2:13-16

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Message

“What’s in a Name?”

So this week’s lectionary gives us two important scriptures to study this morning; the ten commandments and Jesus’s cleansing of the temple. In addition, the UCC suggests we celebrate Amistad Sunday. It is also communion Sunday and the CDC recommends we keep gatherings short to lessen the risk of exposure so I had better get to it!

These things can all seem unrelated but in our faith narrative things are never unrelated because we are all connected back to God. In this passage in Exodus two of the most important themes of our faith emerge: *God cares about how we treat one another and God longs for a relationship with us*. If you remember these two things you will live your life in keeping with God’s will, always. God cares about how we treat one another and God longs for a relationship with us, to be connected, to live in covenant, to guide and love us.

I’m not going to go through each of the commandments but I do want you to remember that God’s love is what is behind each of them so when people use them to judge one another then they are missing the point.

I also want us to note the contradiction here. This scripture starts with remembering God bringing the Israelites out of slavery, so you could assume that the scripture says that God wants us to be free right? Of course that is who we have come to understand God to be, but as this ancient scripture continues it’s obvious that our understanding of God had a long way to go yet. It reads “thou shall not covet your neighbor's slave” yet says nothing about not having slaves in the first place. So according to this scripture God wanted the Israelites free but wasn’t weighing in on slavery in general. Fast forward two and a half thousand years to 1839.

In 1839, a group of illegally enslaved Africans broke free while being transported around the island of Cuba aboard the coasting schooner Amistad. They killed some of the crew because a cook had told them “jokingly” that he was going to cook them for dinner and they feared for their lives. They attempted to sail the small vessel back to Africa, but were captured by a US ship off the coast of Long Island, charged with mutiny, and threatened with a return to slavery.

Connecticut Congregationalists (now part of the UCC) formed the Amistad Committee, which organized a legal defense, eased the captives confinement during the lengthy court case, and eventually funded their return to Africa after winning a favorable decision from the US Supreme Court. If you get a chance to watch Amistad again it is an excellent movie. The ruling was that since they had been captured illegally their crimes were justified in the protection of their freedom. The Amistad Committee became a seed for wider advocacy for the abolition of slavery in the United States which would still not happen for another generation and only after a horribly bloody war.

So in the time that passed from the writing of Exodus to the civil war this passage and many others were used time and time again to justify treating human beings as property and in many places the scriptures are still used to treat women as inferior, to deny communion to people who have survived divorce, and exclude LGBTQ folks.

Something I realized while I looked around the old church once was that many of your families came from Germany and settled here and your family tree took root and thrived here in the same soil. Mine on the other hand started with settlers on the south-eastern seaboard in the 1600's and 1700's and slowly migrated westward but still always in the south.

When I think of Amistad I think about this one direct ancestor of mine that left his family and went to fight for the North because of his belief that human beings were not meant to be owned. That is one relative out of hundreds that fought for the south. Now I would really like to just think about that one relative, to think all my DNA came directly from him and that my family was not complicit in the systematic abuse of other human beings. I would really like to forget all the Klan members in my tree, all the lynchings, the tar and featherings, the spitting on and name calling.

I am proud of our denomination but focusing on this Amistad story is a little like me focusing on that one relative without owning up to the rest of the story. The rest of the story is that our church, our denomination, Christianity in general has been complicit in all the social ills that we are still fighting and struggling to overcome.

Christianity was complicit in the genocide of the indigenous people here, complicit in racism, complicit in homophobia, complicit in creating a culture where women had no voice or power. Our religion has often run alongside a culture that puts profit over people, that often turns a deaf ear to suffering and we misuse scripture time and time again to justify doing it.

Supposedly good, God fearing folk have used scripture to beat up people and participated in a culture of shame rather than one of compassion. Humiliating people, excluding people, justifying tremendous acts of violence and even war all the while holding up the Bible and quoting from it.

This scripture about Jesus getting angry was used to justify war many times, it was used by the great reformationist John Calvin to justify burning alive another theologian that disagreed with him. Instead of just letting Jesus have a bad day where he was fed up with injustice, fed up with idolatry, people have used this scripture to justify all manner of bad behavior. Again, focusing on that one passage and ignoring all the other instances where Jesus definitively claims that we are to love one another and to love God, over and over again that is the part of the narrative we are to hear, to learn, to understand with our hearts and to live out in our lives.

I think it is important to remember our past as a people, to learn from it so we aren't doomed to repeat it. And, no I am not accountable for all those relatives of mine that owned human beings or asked them to move to the back of the bus. But, I am responsible for knowing better and doing better. I am responsible for remembering all of history, not just the part that makes me look and feel good. And I am absolutely responsible as a Christian and as a human for my own behavior and to try and do all that I can to ensure that the generations that follow me put love before law and people before profit.

I am responsible for people hearing the good news from me that we serve a God that longs for connection with us, and longs for each of us to be free and longs for each of us to know love.

God's love and the love of each other and the pure joy that comes from letting love flow out of us into the world around us. May we continue to be a part of evolving humanity toward that love and that freedom. Amen.

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