

Sermon – Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 22A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *Like all of the commandments of God, the 10 Commandments are not about God needing to exercise authority or our needing to satisfy God's demands. Rather, they are guides to a life of freedom, fulfillment, and healthy community.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. God as authority?
 - a. Captain Von Trapp and his boatswain whistle
 - i. It's a fantastic introduction to the character, showing us how he relies on discipline and authority.
 - ii. He has very rigid expectations for his children, and for the new governess (the 12th in only a few years!). However, it doesn't leave much space for the kids to actually know and feel loved by their father.
 - iii. The movie works so well because we see Maria's influence help everyone to relax the rigid system of authority and make real space for love.
 - b. Sometimes, I think we look at God like that initial image of Captain Von Trapp.
 - i. The 10 commandments, and the whole of the OT law, are seen as a rigid system of authority that we must submit to.
 - ii. God has brought the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the desert, and now it is time for God to lay down the law, showing the people what is expected of them.
 - iii. The people are understandably afraid, and Moses' words don't seem all that helpful to me.
 - c. An unhealthy image of God
 - i. Just as the rigid discipline and authority got in the way of Captain Von Trapp's relationship with his children, so it can in our relationship with God.
 - ii. Fear is not a basis for healthy relationship, and perfect love drives out fear!
 - iii. More, we've seen that the book of Exodus is a book of becoming – as the people figure out who God is and who they are. So, in that context, how should we look at the 10 Commandments?
2. Freedom from...
 - a. Walter Bruggemann and *Sabbath as Resistance*
 - i. The law as a source of freedom
 - ii. The commandments are a guide for a different way to be human, constraining the worst excesses of the logic of empire under which Israel lived for years!
 - iii. Empire worships money, sex, and especially power, so the 10 commandments say no to those false Gods. Empire demands constant productivity and hustle, so the

commandments say no. Empire treats people as resources to be used and abused and exploited. The commandments say no.

- b. Value in the 10 commandments – they have often formed a moral framework for society.
 - i. Every successful society faces the temptation of the logic of empire, and the commandments offer freedom from that logic.
 - ii. I don't think they belong on court and classroom walls in a pluralistic society, but I can see some attraction if we read them like this! They would not be a sign of our greatness, but a stark reminder against the temptations of imperial logic.
- c. The problem with "freedom from"
 - i. I imagine that Captain Von Trapp leaned into this system to obtain freedom from his grief at the loss of his wife, and from feeling overwhelmed by raising his children - but it was slowly killing him (and perhaps them!).
 - ii. "Freedom from" leads to individualism, and ultimately to isolation. We are seeing it in our country that is so committed to "Don't tread on me."
 - iii. Jesus' parable – the tenants are so obsessed with being free from the owner that they act irrationally and ruin everything.

3. Freedom for...

- a. Alternative: Freedom for
 - i. In the Sound of Music, Maria presents an alternative: "Freedom for". She isn't objecting to the rigid system and the system simply because she finds whistles insulting. Rather, she wants the children to be able to play, to find enjoyment, to sing, and – most especially – to know that they are loved by their father.
 - ii. Philosophers talk about "positive" and "negative" freedom – freedom for and freedom from. Negative freedom tends to be easier to articulate, but positive freedom is much richer.
 - iii. Though most of the 10 commandments are stated as negatives, we have the opportunity to read them differently. The 5th commandment even gives us an idea of how that works.
- b. Looking at the 10 Commandments through the lens of positive freedom (These are some ideas – but you may have different and better takes! It's a fun exercise...):
 - i. Freedom to be wholehearted and focused in worship and hope.
 - ii. Freedom to see God in all of creation
 - iii. Freedom to not have all the answers about God
 - iv. Freedom to rest
 - v. Freedom to have healthy relationships with parents
 - vi. Freedom to feel safe in the world
 - vii. Freedom to work through challenges with your spouse and build a healthy marriage
 - viii. Freedom to be generous with your resources
 - ix. Freedom to trust and communicate well
 - x. Freedom to see your neighbor as a whole person, and to collaborate for the common good.
- c. St. Francis and interdependence rather than independence
 - i. Whatever particulars appeal to you, the key idea is that God wants us to be free to live good and beautiful lives – not just free from evil and pain.

- ii. This kind of freedom calls us more deeply into relationship with each other, and with the world around us – which makes this a particular fitting reminder for the Sunday when we honor St. Francis (with his love for all of God’s creatures).
- iii. More, it is an especially important call in a society that sometimes finds itself choking to death on negative freedom.
- iv. Our invitation today, as we reflect on the 10 commandments, is to move toward an increasingly positive expression of faith and freedom, trusting that it is God calling us onward.

Amen.

Notes:

- Negative vs. Positive freedom – Many of the commandments are phrased negatively, and we can end up thinking that’s the point, but they can also be read as a call to positive freedom.
- This isn’t just a case of God saying, “Well, I rescued you from Egypt, now it’s time to get some things straight and for you to play your proper role.”
- Individualism of negative freedom vs. the Interdependence of St. Francis and positive freedom
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