

Sermon
October 8, 2017
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Today we heard the reading from the Law given to Moses— from the book of Exodus— The Law. The Centerpiece of the Torah. We are most familiar with the Law, as it is summarized in what is known as the Ten Commandments. Presented as a sort of “rule of life” for the community. The community of Israelites in the wilderness—but also for us. Rules. Guidelines. A sort of Judeo-Christian foundation for morality and ethics.

As a child, I was required to memorize them. I wore them on a little silver bracelet that was given to me when I was confirmed. I suppose I was about twelve years old.

In many of the oldest colonial churches in Maryland the reredos, the back wall of the sanctuary includes two tables—carved in wood— or etched in marble. In the responsory psalm, in response to the reading from Exodus we say together—

The law of the Lord is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the Lord is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
The statutes of the Lord are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the Lord is clear
and gives light to the eyes.

A young man gave me a plaque a few years back. He said one had been given to him as a teen and that it had helped him tremendously—had helped him develop a sense of right and wrong, what to do and not do growing up in a confusing world. Here are the Teen Commandments:

1. God is #1
2. Watch your language.
3. Make faith a priority.
4. Respect adults.
5. Increase peace.
6. Practice abstinence.
7. Don't do anything you have to lie about.
8. Be positive, true, kind.
9. The things that matter are not even “things” at all.
10. Do all this and you can't go wrong.

I watched Sesame Street the other day with my granddaughter—he'll be two in January— this was her first time watching television. She was mesmerized. What I heard was a new song with a refrain that seemed to sum up purpose of the new Sesame Street—

Be smarter, stronger, kinder.

In our own Godly Play for young children—the approach is to share them as a love story, calling them “The Ten Best Ways.” Not the only ways, but the best ways. They are gifts from God. Gifts from a God who loves us and who wants to help us learn to live the way God would have us live. It’s all good stuff.

But note how the lessons appointed for today readings are stacked up. The Ten Commandments are followed by a second reading, Paul’s testimony, a striking testimony—a confession really. He says, that though he is the best of the best, a member of the people, of the tribe of Benjamin, a learned Pharisee, righteous under the law, blameless—yet has come to a totally new understanding—because of.. because of the sufferings of Christ. Everything he thought was of value is now rubbish. That’s what he calls it. Useless. Meaningless. He no longer counts on his own righteousness, as he calls it. He has been totally changed. Now he wants only to be part of God’s call in Christ. What can this be? What happened to Paul? All we really know is that he witnessed the stoning of Stephen—the first martyr. And that he experienced a vision of Christ so overwhelming that blinded him for a time—a vision so powerful that it knocked him off his horse and caused him to be cared for by others for a time.

What happened to Paul—this great “champion of the law” and “hero of righteousness?”

There is a rabbinic teaching that goes like this:

The student says to the Rabbi, “Why does the Torah say “The Word is written on our heart?”

The Rabbi said, “So that when our hearts are broken, the Word may fall in.”

So that when our hearts are broken, the Word may fall in. Not many of us have an experience so intense that we are knocked off a horse—or do we? There are plenty of times and experiences in this world of ours, in our lives—in the life of every person here—plenty of opportunities and experiences that break your heart. The news from around the world just in the past few weeks is enough to make us all cry. Hurricanes destroying people’s homes and lives. Mexico City. Puerto Rico. Earthquakes. Nuclear threats. The tragedy and loss of life in Las Vegas. Continuing wars and loss of life. These events add to the already tragic condition of the poor and the marginalized, and those who disadvantaged and harmed in America’s culture and racial wars. It’s no wonder there is an opioid crisis. There is a crisis of pain and fear and hopelessness. It is as if we are overdosing on pain. Heart-breaking up-close pictures of events and personal stories that touch every family enter our homes every evening on the news. It’s terrible to have your heart and your hope broken — everyday.

I thought back to that young girl who I was, in 1960, when I was given the ten commandments bracelet and expected to memorize them. It was only a few years later that I decided to learn

about Johnson's "War on Poverty" for my eighth grade project. My mother took me to Paterson, New Jersey with my camera. (Just a little box Brownie and ten rolls of film.) I remember deeply what I saw. Dirty streets. Abandoned buildings. Polluted streams running under cement bridges. People standing around street corners. Children playing in the street. No trees. No gardens. Smoggy air. Factories choking out black smoke. I remember one sight, in particular, that caught my attention and I took a picture. It was a doll, caught between rocks in the dirty, foamy water under a cement bridge. I later gave a slide show for my school project. It was a sad story about the cost of poverty and broken, lost lives. I think it was the first time my heart was really broken —in a way that mattered, in a way that changed the rest of my life.

I don't really have much else to say this morning. It's been a difficult week for many people. I would simply like to leave you with the thought about God's love falling into our broken hearts and helping us know what to do and how to live.

John Donne, a English poet and cleric in the Church of England in the seventeenth century wrote a poem acknowledging the grace of a broken heart. Here is an excerpt:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, overthrew me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
...Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Amen.