

The 1st Commandment
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
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Gordon Wiersma

Text: Leviticus 19 & Matthew 5

How do you do with commandments? In other words, how do you like being told what to do? From my personal experience and my observation of others, it doesn't always sit so well with us human types to be commanded – to be told what to do. One of the first words many children come up right along with 'Mama' or Dada' is 'NO!' – and it doesn't seem to really matter what the 'NO!' is about – the desire to say 'NO!' is a powerful thing...and it continues well beyond childhood! And by that I don't mean it continues for teenagers – which parents may well find it does! – I mean it continues to us – you – me. I feel in myself a complicated relationship with commands: no matter what, when someone tells me what to do there is a little tug of resistance; and on the flip side, there can be a kind of power trip in telling other people what to do. (You'll notice with little ones that almost as popular as 'No!' is then her or him telling YOU what to do!).

Well then, with this fraught relationship with commands, good thing that as people of faith, as Christians, we don't have to deal with commandments, with being told what to do, right? Wait – what? – we do? Oh that's right! – those 613 Old Testament commandments – there are those; but mostly us 'modern' folks pay more attention to the 10 commandments – we're on record here as being in favor of those. But we talk more here about those 2 commandments from Scripture: love God and love others – boiled down to the 1 commandment of love. And certainly we wouldn't push back against such a command - who could be against love?

'Love your neighbor'...well, actually I have some push back in me about that about a few of my neighbors – and my concerns are well justified, I assure you!

‘Love your enemy’ (it says that in Leviticus and Matthew too)...well, actually, I feel some resistance in myself about that – some security concerns actually.

‘Love God!’...well, honestly, sometimes I feel a catch in myself about that too. When I have questions – when I feel angry about life – when I feel lost – or simply when I am wayward and don’t follow God’s way. I am not always sure what it means or how to love God.

What kind of a person am I that I can’t even handle “Love” as a command?! - it seems that the “NO!” perhaps runs deeper in me than I can really understand.

So here’s what I’d like to do as far as commandments go, I’d like to start over. And let’s start over by adding 1 more command – since 613 wasn’t enough! But I’d like to add just one more command, and put it at the start – before the 613 and the 10 and the 2 and the 1 – and here’s how this new 1st commandment goes: ‘I am the LORD’ – it’s from Leviticus 19 – ‘I am the LORD your God.’ That’s the commandment – and if you think it doesn’t sound like a commandment, you’re right, but that’s what we need to explore. And to do that, I’d like to ask you all to turn in your pew Bibles to Leviticus 19 – it’s page 93 – because there’s something I want you to see there. When you find that passage – we read verses 1-2 and verse 9-18 - you’ll notice a couple of things. You can see how in verses 9-18 ‘I am the LORD’ is an ongoing refrain that concludes the commands from God – the end of verse 10: “I am the LORD your God”; verse 12 “I am the LORD”; verse 14 “I am the LORD”; verse 16, verse 18 “I am the LORD”. And along with this refrain the other thing to notice, and the reason I wanted you to actually *look* at this passage, is how the word LORD is spelled – which is in all capital letters – see that? Whenever you see the word LORD in the Bible like this, it is indicating that the word there being translated is the very particular holy name for God which is YHWH in Hebrew – and it means “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be”. This name for God is usually transliterated to be pronounced as ‘Yahweh’, but actually no one knows precisely what the name is – only the vowels have been preserved, and no one knows the original pronunciation.

So the refrain in Leviticus is not just a generic “I am God” – it is, I am Yahweh - I am who I am - I am the LORD. I wanted you to see that (but now you can close your Bible ☺)

Pastor Jill is away this weekend, but this past week I told her that I would be pointing out this name of YHWH/LORD in Leviticus, because I knew she would find that a bit amusing. You see, Pastor Jill likes to tease me a bit (I know that it is shocking that Jill teases me – please forgive her ☺) about how obsessed I can be that we get the word LORD correct in our liturgy. If you look at the Sentences in the liturgy, you’ll see LORD in caps, which shows that the Psalms are using the name of YHWH for God. I can be downright legalistic about making sure it is right (speaking of law and commands!), which is why Jill rightly rolls her eyes at me sometimes. But the reason I do make a point of it - even if at times too much – is that encountering the name of YHWH/LORD has become for me an important point of depth and mystery in my faith. I ponder this reality of a holy name for God that is not fully known, of God even having a particular name, of the deep meaning of “I am who I am” – and as I do ponder, I would tell you off the record that it is all at times a bit too mystical or even hocus pocus sounding for my modern, Protestant, white, male, scientific brain; which is the very reason I think it is so important, for me and for all of us. To encounter the name of YHWH/LORD is an encounter with mystery not in the sense of riddle or confusion, but mystery as something that contains more than we can fully know yet invites us to know more deeply.

And more than just mystery – the NAME, YHWH, Yahweh reveals identity. The litany of ‘I am the LORD’ grounds all that is said, all that is commanded, in who God is. I am YHWH...the creator of heaven and earth (how we start our worship most weeks here) ; I am YHWH...of Abraham and Sarah, blessing them and all their generations; I am YHWH...who freed you from Egypt; I am YHWH who brought you to a land...; I am YHWH...who is holy. This is who YHWH is – the God of creation and blessing and freedom and home – the Holy One.

And it is in the mystery and identity of YHWH that I think we can see it functioning as a 1st commandment. Because before all the laws and commandments, before all the rules and requirements, before even all the justice and righteousness and love, there is God: YHWH – the Holy God of creation, blessing, freedom, home. And it is in hearing who God is, that we are grounded always and again in who we are: you are a creation of God, living in God’s world; you as a person of faith have an identity of blessing and freedom and home - you worship a holy God. So when the command is: ‘I am the LORD’ – you know who God is, and who you are - and that is when all the commandments make sense. Because it turns out that this identity of who God is and who you are, calls you toward others and this world in love – in compassion – in justice; it is an identity of God and self that sees others too as God’s creation, as made too to live with an identity of blessing, freedom and home. “I am the LORD” – start there, and the rest follows.

Now at this point, if I were you, here’s what I would do – I would tell me to turn in my Bible to Leviticus a little after this chapter 19 – where you could point to laws that say to stone people who worship idols; commands to put to death anyone who curses his father or mother; or even if you want to lower the stakes a little, a ban on tattoos - and the name of LORD is invoked for all these too. So what do you say about that, Preacher Gordon? – if I’m going to lift up that inspiring theme of identity in who the LORD is and who we are and who others are, then what about this? And how I would respond is: that’s a very good question! – in fact it is the question for each generation and for us today. We might like to hide away things that we don’t like (there’s a reason Leviticus is only in the lectionary once!) but that doesn’t hold much integrity. Instead I want to say that all those laws in Leviticus aren’t what’s most essential – even those good and important things that we heard from our reading. Because it is clear to me that in that time and place God’s people were sorting out how best to live, and some of the things they claimed in the name of the LORD were right and others were not. But if we take the command “I am the LORD” as the starting point, then that is the truth we bring into our time as we seek to live as God’s people.

When Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount, I don't think the details of all the good and challenging and sometimes peculiar commands and demands he makes are most important – what is essential is this: “you have heard it said, but I say” – Jesus is invoking who he is as the LORD, YHWH, “I AM” present with us – the LORD of creation, blessing, freedom, home – the holy one.

To be a part of a community of faith, to be a part of the broader church, to be a Christian is often to be a part of debates about what is allowed and required of people – what are the rules, the commands to follow? To be a citizen, in this community, in our nation and part of our world, is to be in the midst of debates about what laws to make and to follow to guide our corporate life. What should those rules, those commands, those laws be? – well, whatever I or anyone would say, I'm sure someone would say ‘NO!’ Which is why today I want to start with that 1st commandment: “I am the LORD” – start with the God of creation, blessing, freedom, home – the truth of who God is, is where to begin. Because it is then our calling in our time as people who call on the name of the LORD to have the truth of who God is form the shape of our lives together. How do I live as a child of creation, blessing, freedom, home? How do I see my neighbors and enemies too as made to live in God's gifts of creation, blessing, freedom and home? I believe that if we start with “I am the LORD”, we can get beyond a NO of being told what to do, and live into a YES to who God is and who God created us to be – a YES to God with us now bringing into our midst the gifts of creation, blessing, freedom and home – the holiness of God shaping our lives together. That is our calling and witness as Christians and citizens, as neighbors and enemies, to shape the commands and laws that are faithful in our day – a shape faithful to who the LORD is.

Hear this: “I am the LORD” – and in that holy mystery and truth, may we live in this day as God's people.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.