

NO GREATER LOVE

May 29, 2011

Now Moses was on Mount Sinai for a very long time. Moses was on Mount Sinai for so very long that the people of Israel had almost given up on expecting that Moses would ever come back down that mountain. But, just when they were ready to let go of Moses and make it on their own, Moses did, in fact, come down the mountain. And, as he came, they saw that a veil hid his face. Moses, you see, had been with God and, because he had been in God's presence, Moses' face was shining in reflection of God's glory, so a veil covered that glory. Yet, beneath the veil, there still was the glow of God's majesty.

As Moses came down the mountain, he discovered that the people of Israel were encamped at the foot of that mountain: waiting and wondering what great things he was bringing to them. And so, when Moses arrived at the foot of the mountain, Moses looked at the great expanse of the people of Israel, and Moses said to them: ***I have good news and bad news.*** What's the good news? ***The good news is I got Him down to ten.*** What's the bad news? ***The bad news is adultery is still in!***

Well, brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments! Now one of you told me this story last week and I laughed as do most folks laugh when they hear that story. But, you know, beneath the laughter there is a sobering reality. And the reality is lust; that is, the reality is the appetites of our desires. No matter how much we feed our desires, our craving remains insatiable.

Yes, adultery is still in. We, as humans, lust for pleasure. We are obsessed, in fact, with satisfying all of our physical pleasures. But, you know, that obsession is also the craving we sometimes hide behind so we don't have to face our more insidious desires.

Coveting and stealing—they're still in...and that's all about our lust for possessions. Our craving for possessions is a dominant force in the contemporary scene where we live, the scene where economic politics depends on the super-charged engine of retail marketing. Yes, coveting and stealing are still in.

Oh, by the way, bearing false witness and murder—they're still in, too! And those commandments are all about our lust for power because, you know, we will say anything and we will do anything to get ahead in this world and to destroy the competition. In our society that screams pro-life, we also yearn for the death penalty and concealed carry. Is anybody packing heat this morning? How we doing with these? How obediently are we keeping these commandments?

Brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments!

And these commandments: well, they're just the last five...they're just the second tablet that Moses carried down the mountain. They're the ones that teach us how God expects us to live with each other. But the first five are still in, too! That first tablet still applies...you know, the one that says ***You shall have no other gods before me.*** In other words, don't ever look to another source for the meaning of your life. ***You shall not make for yourselves idols.*** That means don't worship anything else but me. And that's a hard one to keep in a culture where

everything is an idol. That first tablet also says that we should not take the name of the Lord in vain. How many times today will you hear someone say – Oh, God! – and have them not be talking about anything holy? And then there's that business of remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy. It seems to me there's a little room in this room for a few more people to keep that commandment today. And then, finally, honor your father and your mother...you know, the 'rents...those people who don't understand us, and oppress us, and make us miserable. The first five commandments are still in, too!

Brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments!

There are just ten of them...just ten commandments...but we can't even keep ten! So, instead, what do we do with these commandments? Well, sometimes we treat them as suggestions; you know, the ten *suggestions* of God from Moses, and we only listen to them when we feel like it. Or perhaps they are, these Ten Commandments, multiple choice. We'll pick the ones we want and leave the others behind.

And, if we *do* keep them, if we *do* strive to fulfill all ten, how often is it because of fear that we do it...because we believe that, if we don't...if we don't obey these Ten Commandments...we will suffer the consequences; we will be punished. God will get us; God will make us pay. Commandments, you see, are kind of like Brussels sprouts and prunes. We don't like them much...we don't want them...they don't taste good...but somebody has told us that they're good for us, so we'd better eat them!

Brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments!

But the real problem with the commandments is not how we avoid them and squirm and wiggle and try to get out of them. The real problem with the commandments is that they are external to us. They're foreign to our natures. They are things that we simply don't want and we wish – oh, we wish – they could just go away! Sometimes we chisel them in stone and enshrine them on the courthouse lawn, and I wonder if we do that not so much to lift them up as to excuse ourselves from them, from having them written with love on human hearts.

Brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments!

Now you need to know that the commandments mattered to Jesus. The rich young ruler came to Jesus and said to Him: *Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* And Jesus' answer to this rich young ruler was, very simply: *Keep the second tablet!* That's what Jesus said: *Keep the second tablet!* Five commands.

Later on a Pharisee asked Jesus: *Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?* And Jesus said: *Well, there are two.* Jesus' answer – two commands: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...and love your neighbor as yourself.*

But, then, as Jesus taught His disciples in His farewell moments, Jesus said to His disciples: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Brothers and sisters, we have a problem with the commandments!

Israel took those Ten Commandments and turned them into six hundred and thirteen. Jesus took those Ten Commandments and turned them into one. Is this Jesus' way of letting us off easy? **No! No, it's not.** Instead, this is Jesus' way of taking what is foreign and external...this is Jesus' way of taking what is filled with loopholes and exceptions...this is Jesus' way of taking all that stuff that seems to have nothing to do with our desires and our needs and making it natural for us and internal...a commandment that is lean, that is void of possibilities for compromise.

Love one another: three words...a commandment of severe simplicity with no limitations:
Love one another! Notice that Jesus didn't say:

not just white folks...not just Christian folks...not just Republican folks...not just Democratic folks...not just straight folks...not just financially secure folks...not just American folks...not just nice folks...and not just deserving folks.

No, Jesus simply said: ***Love one another! Love one another!***

In Jesus' command there is no qualification or limitation. We're the ones who do that. We're the ones who make it complicated and difficult. We add qualifications to it. We add limitations to it, and we do it to make it more acceptable to us. Dare I say it? We do it to enshrine the prejudice of our own superiority. But Jesus, bless His heart, Jesus gave us no escape hatch.

This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you!

And there's the challenge! In those qualifying words, the external does become internal...the arbitrary becomes experiential: ***as I have loved you! Now you know what I'm talking about!***

Love one another, as I have loved you. By loving us, Jesus gets inside of us. By loving us, the threat of punishment becomes the transformation of investment. At the Areopagus, the apostle Paul preached a sermon to the Greeks who had gathered there and said to them:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'

You see, the religion of Greece was an external religion that had been designed to avoid the wrath of the gods and to manipulate the gods for human benefit. And, in order to do that effectively and thoroughly, the Greeks built a temple to an unknown God...just so they had all their bases covered!

To these Greeks the apostle Paul says, that's a wonderful system and it's extremely religious, but it's not the faith of Jesus because, in Jesus, we do ***live and move and have our being***. In Him we find our existence, and our vitality, and our purpose...and all three are love.

Love one another...as I have loved you. When we hear that, and believe that, and do that, punishment becomes investment, and retribution becomes redemption, and commandment becomes compassion.

Love one another...as I have loved you. The cross tells us that it's so. The cross of Jesus tells us that it's so. It tells us that Jesus decided to die rather than to give up on us or to let us go. The cross of Jesus is the choice of Jesus' convictions to do exactly that, not the coincidence of Jesus' circumstance. It's the choice of His convictions, not the coincidence of His circumstance. Or, in Jesus' words:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. Love one another, as I have loved you.

This Memorial Day weekend, as much as it symbolizes the beginning of summer, is much more about those who have died; those who have laid down their lives for their friends. This weekend pays tribute to those whose choice of conviction and whose commitment to this nation cost them their lives. So this day and this weekend we do honor them, and lift them up, and remember them, and give them thanks. ***There is no one greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.***

Ever since I can remember, Abraham Lincoln was my hero. I even wrote a poem about him in third grade. Do you want to hear it?

***Abraham Lincoln was brave and bold.
He freed the slaves, young and old.
They called him their savior, savior he was.
He brought them a nation, proud to behold.
They remolded their lives for what Abe had done.
Abe did something, something that had to be done.***

Well, it was third grade!

Last Thursday evening, I stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. Abraham Lincoln: a president who laid down his life for his friends and his enemies...a president who laid down his life for the emancipation of all Americans. The spirit of his commitment is expressed in the final words of his second inaugural address, delivered a month before he died. Lincoln said:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

On the landing of those steps, between the first set and the second flights that lead to the statue of Abraham Lincoln, there is engraved in the marble an inscription that memorializes the spot where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his most famous speech, on August 28th, 1963. He was a preacher, you know: a preacher who laid down his life for his friends and his enemies...a preacher who laid down his life for the equality of all Americans. At the end of that speech, Martin Luther King said:

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Brothers and sisters, let us have no more problems with the commandments!

Because you see, our Lord's command is not a rule to be kept. It is a love to be lived. Our Lord's command is not something foreign, or external, or burdensome to us. No, *for in Him we live and move and have our being!*

This is my commandment, says Jesus, *that you love one another as I have loved you!*

So let us do what Jesus commands. Let us lay down *our* lives for *our* friends as we live for a world where, in the definition of friend, there is no qualification or limitation. There is no greater love! Amen.

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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