

Sermon – Accountable, Responsible, Sustainable
Sunday, October 5, 2014
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-18
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As we join Christians from the east and the west, the north and the south to celebrate World Communion Sunday, it is good to reflect together on these ancient, holy words in Exodus 20, which form the foundation of Christian ethics. The people of Israel continue their wilderness journey “in stages.” In the scripture reading last week, the thirsty community cried out for water, and God made water flow from a rock. This week, we find them at the mountain of Sinai. Sinai is set apart as a separate holy place. The giving of the Ten Commandments becomes a sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. They are a practical outworking of God’s intention for God’s people to live whole and healthy lives. They provide the road toward lives which are accountable, responsible and sustainable. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 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. 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses God’s name. 8 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 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. 18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, 19 and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” 20 Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you so that you do not sin.” Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Accountable, Responsible, Sustainable

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, who brought us out of the house of bondage, thank you for providing the guidelines and boundaries, which lead to freedom and sustainable lives. As we reflect together on your Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...
The more I called them, the more they went from me.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
I lead them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that can compare to the metaphor of God as One rearing and nurturing an infant. These words in Hosea 11 portray Israel’s God, Yahweh, as One who gives birth to a people, from the crossing of the Red Sea...to One who nourishes and sustains the infant nation, providing manna and water through the stages of their faith journey in the wilderness as they grow into the people God intended them to be.

In today's scripture, the loving Yahweh, who is like a mother and father to Israel, provides the rules and boundaries, the ethical foundation that will make the forming of this people possible.... the sculpting of their lives within the Potter's hands.

Moses presented the Decalogue, the ten words or the Ten Commandments around 1300 BCE. Joan Chittister, in her book The Ten Commandments – Laws of the Heart, reminds us that these were not the first list of guidelines in ancient history, neither were they the only list. About four hundred years prior to Moses (around 1700 BCE), Hammurabi, King of Babylon, did a remarkable thing. He bound himself and the people he ruled to 272 statutes, which he had inscribed on a pillar more than fourteen feet high for all in his kingdom to see.

The Code of Hammurabi brought a new order and stability. For the first time, royal decree ceased to be arbitrary and the people were informed of the laws they were required to follow. Until Hammurabi, law was essentially the whim of the king. Laws were created at the king's fancy, and could be changed by him at any moment.

Four centuries later, Moses, who led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, gave another set of "laws" by which to live. These laws were not the laws of Moses—subject to change by any leader to follow—no, these were the law of their Yahweh God, the One who taught them to walk, the One whom they feared. These ten simple words embodied the mind and heart of God—irrevocable & unchangeable, which would carve them into a people "blessed to be a blessing." These laws were to be written on the mind and in the heart of the children of Yahweh for all time to come.

In this sense the giving of the Ten Commandments was unique. They were given to create the fullness of life, not simply a well-ordered life. They speak to our relationship to Yahweh, our reverence for life and our respect for others and what belongs to them.

In the Decalogue, Yahweh teaches Yahweh's children the importance of saying "no" (thou shall not) because the truth is one cannot say "yes" to life until one has learned first to say "no"...no to the distractions, the temptations and the false idols along the way of growing up and coming into one's own. The voices of our culture speak of unlimited choices and tell us we can and should have everything and have it NOW! ... and yet, studies in human development confirm the importance of "delayed gratification." Young children who are able to wait, to postpone, to delay gratification live more accomplished, fulfilling lives as they mature and develop. We can never underestimate the importance of accepting limitations and providing healthy boundaries for our children on their journey into adulthood in the wilderness of life.

What Yahweh hopes for Yahweh's children, the people of Israel, is what each one of us hopes for our children...that they will grow into loving, kind, yes—successful, but more importantly—generous people ... *accountable* for their lives and the choices they make, *responsible* to the society and faith communities in which they live and *sustainable* within productive, healthy and meaningful relationships.

The question of exactly how children develop morality has been a question for parents, religions, and philosophers for ages. One of the best known theories was developed in the 20th century by a psychologist named Lawrence Kohlberg who modified and expanded upon Jean Piaget's work.

For Kohlberg, the journey of morality begins with the very young being obedient to avoid punishment –“I will do as I am told to avoid getting a time out.”

Next, children begin changing their behavior to obtain rewards and favors. They become very concerned with what is fair and who's getting what during elementary school.

As the journey continues into adolescence, one seeks to be “good” to maintain good relations and the approval of others. Friends, and what they think, become very important during these years.

By young adulthood, there is the understanding that one needs to follow the rules to avoid censure by legitimate authorities.

Hopefully, by adulthood one's journey takes them into the final stage, where one does the right thing because it's the right thing to do and for the welfare of the community. The rules one began obeying to avoid punishment as a little child become the principles embraced as a part of one's conscience, inner being and character. When there is a consistency between what one says and what one does, we call this integrity...

We gather with Christians around the world grateful for Yahweh who taught us to walk, for Christ who walked the way of sorrow on our behalf and for the Spirit who strengthens each of us for the walk that is ours. We gather with sisters and brothers on this World Communion Sunday to be nourished by the God who bound us to these ten simple, yet profound words that we might grow into the freedom of living lives which are accountable, responsible and sustainable. By the grace of God, may it be so! Amen.