

I read the Law-giving story from Deuteronomy today, and I have to confess, I'm a little stuck. What is there new to say about the Ten Commandments, for heaven's sake? And, do you really need to hear them again? Nobody here is perfect, but I'm willing to bet you gentle people are well aware that we should not murder or steal, that God's name is not to be misused, and that the Sabbath is not only a gift but also a requirement. It reminds me of a lectionary commentary that an Episcopal priest gave me when I was ordained. Every other sermon, it turned out, should be about the eucharist, and the gist of the sermon was always that the eucharist was a good thing and should be celebrated.

The one sort of provocative thing I see here, because it's the second recitation of the Decalog, is that Moses is telling the people that God made this covenant with them, personally, not their ancestors, but those who are alive today, listening to Moses. But in fact, the first time the Ten Commandments are given as a covenant, it's actually given to the previous generation! It *is* their ancestors, not them, who make this covenant. Moses goes up the mountain, leaving his brother Aaron in charge, Aaron fails miserably and enables the nervous people to create their own idol, a golden calf, and Moses comes down and just about skins them all alive. The Law had been given to the escaped slaves from Egypt, but that was 40 years ago, and most of those people have died, and the ones hearing it this time around are *not* the ones who heard it the first time.

So what's up with that? I can only think that he doesn't want people to think of the Law as an historical artifact, something that was given once to certain people who lived and died. He wants his hearers to think of the Law as having been given to *them*, personally, directly. It reminds me of my students who tend to think that in "Bible times," whatever that was, people

were fundamentally different than they are now. Mothers weren't at all worried about putting their babies in baskets on the river, and people just filed right out of Egypt behind Moses with no doubts or fears because in those days they were so close to God. It takes a while to change that mindset, to get that people are always people, and that our ancestors in faith did not speak in Old English font.

The Law, Moses implies, is given afresh to every generation. So what does it mean to us, today? Again, I'm reluctant to go through the content with a fine-tooth comb because it's just so familiar and, in a sense, redundant. We already incorporate these rules into our lives, however imperfectly. What the whole list represents, taken together, is an outline for how God's people should live together harmoniously. You who were slaves are now free; therefore cast off the habits of Egypt and live with mutual respect and dignity.

My new favorite lectionary podcast features a Christian scholar, Robert Williamson, who pointed out in this context that because he is very privileged, he isn't sure how to take this framing, if he's to take the Law as being given fresh to him in his life. Certainly like all of us he's probably had times of being enslaved by fear or by addiction or a toxic family system, and those are real captivities from which God works to liberate us. But in relative terms he said to the rabbi with whom he does the podcast, he's white, cis male, educated, well-employed, and he's not sure he should claim the kind of memory of enslavement that is assumed in the Ten Commandments. It seems presumptuous. But, he said, he *could* identify with the escaped slaves for whom Egypt had not been that bad, who, once out in the wilderness, began to complain about missing the fleshpots of Egypt, and bad-mouthing Moses for taking them out into the desert where there were no cucumbers or melons. He thought he could see himself

there, longing for a place where he'd personally been comfortable even if others had been miserable.

For Robert Williamson, then, and I think for me and maybe for a number of us, the liberating lifestyle prescribed by the Law *is* liberating, but also requires us not to feel like we deserve privilege. We have it, yes, to various extents, but if the system that gives me privilege also requires the enslavement of my sisters and brothers, then I need to leave that system behind. Or I need to use my privilege in the service of my enslaved sisters and brothers, if I want to live under the covenant.

It's always good to have a sort of call to action after you theorize grandly about something like this, and by the grace of God, one came to me this week. We are, as you know, members of Jubilee USA, an organization that tackles the root causes of global poverty by canceling the debt of poor countries. As their website says,

Jubilee USA as a coalition of religious, development and advocacy groups has won more than \$130 billion in debt relief for the world's poorest economies. Because of the global agreements Jubilee won, that \$130 billion is invested in schools, hospitals and other social infrastructure. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, 54 million kids have gone to school who never would have seen the inside of a classroom.

In recent years, Jubilee USA won debt relief in Haiti and the three Ebola-impacted West African countries, super bankruptcy legislation for Puerto Rico, three international agreements to promote responsible lending and stop predatory lending, two victories to keep student loan interest rates low, G7 and G20 agreements to curb tax evasion and corruption and promoted trade agreements that help end poverty.

Jubilee USA works on debt, tax, trade and transparency policies that help end poverty. When we address these issues, we impact millions of people living in poverty in the United States and across our world. From resolving Puerto Rico's financial crisis to corporate transparency to student debt, Jubilee USA wins solutions that impact our lives and our global community. Jubilee USA builds an economy that serves, protects and promotes participation of the most vulnerable.

Well, this happens to be not only World Communion Sunday, not only the day of the Neighbors in Need offering, but also Jubilee weekend. This is a weekend for Jews, Christians, and Muslims across the US to make a coordinated push for Congress for transparency legislation that helps the vulnerable. It's a perfect opportunity to use our privilege to help liberate others. They say,

for years we've worked with our national faith partners on corporate transparency to make sure debt relief and aid are protected from corruption. We still have a lot of work to win strong transparency measures to stop shell companies from facilitating crimes like human trafficking, theft of development and debt relief aid, drug trafficking, the opioid crisis, terrorism and so much more. It's why we need your help pushing Congress to move this much-needed legislation.

There's a petition on the table, and if we just sign it, I'll mail it to Jubilee and they'll take all the petitions to Congress as part of their ongoing lobbying work. It's not hard, but maybe it doesn't always have to be hard. We can do harder things too, next week.

Fundamentally the Ten Commandments are instructions for how to live harmoniously as free people. To the extent that others are still not free, we're not able to do that. But it looks like a beautiful life, when God's vision is realized—every elder cared for, every household supplied with enough, nobody living in fear of violence or violation. The vision has to be reinterpreted every generation because the challenges change, but the vision that God has for us is always a vision of abundance and peace.

Let us pray:

Lord as we gather around this wonderful meal with Christians everywhere and in every place; bless us all your children. May you strengthen those whose lives feel shattered, don't make sense, in crisis, and experiencing loss. May you say the healing word to those who need it. May you bring the human touch of love to those who have not been touched. May you love the unloved through us.

May you shine your light into those whose world is covered in darkness. May you use us to feed the hungry, clothe the ones who need clothes, give a cup of water to those who are thirsty, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and those in prison, free the enslaved.

May lives be awakened to you, Lord, to your love and to your kingdom whose door is always open to all.