

For the summer, the Narrative Lectionary has us doing three short sermon series, and the first one is on the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments occur in Exodus 20 *and* in Deuteronomy 5, and since we're hearing the Exodus version today, the setting is that of . . . the exodus. Context matters. This is a crowd of recently liberated slaves. Five chapters ago they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, and Miriam and the women sang about it. Then they hit the harsh realities of wandering in the wilderness and began the cycle of grumbling, getting manna or other relief from God, subsiding for a while, and then grumbling again. In chapter 18 Moses' father-in-law Jethro, a priest of *Midian*, showed up for a visit to see how everyone was doing, and was so impressed that he made some sacrifices to God. Then he told Moses to stop working so hard and delegate a little work to qualified people. So a lot has happened in a few chapters, and all of it is formative for this band of Hebrew ex-slaves. All of it is the immediate aftermath of liberation from slavery by the mighty hand of YHWH.

Thus when God calls Moses up to the mountain to receive this covenant, the God who calls is known as liberator. And what is God giving, in the covenant? God is giving a relationship, but a relationship defined by acceptance of a sort of community code, the Law. We'll get into the specific articles in the Law in the next few weeks, but today let's think about the preface we were given in the lection. The larger context, as I said, is liberation from slavery. *That's* salvation. You don't have to follow the Law to be saved; you've already been saved. The Law is the way you live in the light of having been saved.

God gives the law to *all* the Israelites. They, as a whole, are responsible for

creating and maintaining justice in the community. I don't want to retroject Enlightenment values onto the ancient Hebrews, but there is a certain democratic flavor to this. Unlike Hammurabi's code, this code isn't the work of one monarch or one political regime. It's a gift of God to the whole people, and it's their collective responsibility to work it.

The Ten Commandments outline not private morality but a social code, a moral space within which the community will live. It outlines obligations to God and to one's parents, and obligations to neighbors within the community. For people who had been defined by the dehumanizing, shattering experience of slavery, the Ten Commandments establish an alternative model of community. This is a "good neighborhood" in which each member has dignity and responsibility—in unspoken contrast to the imperial rules of Egypt, for instance. What was broken by slavery is set up to heal within the guidelines of the Law of God.

When you look at it that way, you realize why Jews regard the Law as a gift. It is not, as it's been caricatured, a list of ridiculous, unfollowable rules. It's a means to restore broken people to full humanity—people who are already in God's embrace. But it is also given at a moment in time when the kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, and what I mean by that is that the stories of people loving and living by the Law are still stories of works in progress. We know from the rest of the Pentateuch that, for instance, Israelites possessed slaves. They had certain obligations to them, but they certainly did not abhor slavery. We also know that the commandment not to kill was understood to mean, Don't kill any of *us*. By all means kill Canaanites and other non-members of the community. They're different. It

looks like the re-humanizing of the former slaves could not take place in one fell swoop. As they grew into community, they still defined themselves in contrast to others whom they saw as, well, dehumanized.

This is the tribal urge that we have to come to terms with. You see it in the Biblical text itself, when the story is told of Jonah being sent to preach to the hated Ninevites, or the Moabite Ruth becoming the great-grandmother of King David. Clearly later generations were increasingly uncomfortable with the narrow definition of who God's people could be. Clearly they began to have a sense that the God who had liberated *them* probably worked to liberate others too. As the Biblical scholar Brevard Childs wrote, : "... Israel does not first know God, and then later discover what God wants. Knowledge of his person and will are identical, and both are grounded in his self-revelation. . . . God is present and known where the oppressed are freed . . ." God is present and known *where the oppressed are freed*.

Whoever wrote the story of Jonah had come to suspect that the hated people of Assyria, who had invaded Israel and annihilated its population in the 8th century, were as enslaved as anybody else to powers and principalities. And so that writer told the fable of the God of Israel sending one of his own prophets to save them—a reluctant prophet who did not see how God could possibly value a people with such a vicious history. But God is present and known where the oppressed are freed. And once the oppressed are freed, they need a rehumanizing social order to pull them along into God's great project of tearing down walls.

We also need constant rehumanizing of our society, as polarized and socially isolating as it is. And while political action has an important role, the binary choices

of elections unfortunately reinforce polarization. The other thing we need to be doing is mixing with people unlike ourselves—for our own benefit and for theirs.

Krista Tippett had a fascinating conversation last week on her radio show with Derek Black and Matthew Stevenson, who did this thing. Derek Black is the son of a prominent white supremacist, who was active in that movement, and Matthew Stevenson is an Orthodox Jew. They were both students at New College in Florida. When it became known on campus that Derek was this movement racist, Matthew invited him to Shabbat dinner, which he and his roommate had every Friday evening. Matthew says,

the first time that Derek was invited over, I was very explicit with people that this was not “ambush Derek” time. This was not some opportunity to yell at him for the wrongness of his beliefs, because I knew that he [was better prepared to argue than I was, and that it would] put him on the defensive, and he’d never come back. So I was very explicit that people were not to discuss his background at the table, or the white nationalism, more generally.

They just had dinner and talked about things that interested them. At the same time, other people from the Shabbat dinner sometimes had separate conversations with Derek, but the tone had been set, and they were, for want of a better word, friendly. One woman attended one of Derek’s seminars to see if the way he explained white nationalism to a crowd made sense. Afterwards, he says,

was one of the first instances where I could look at it and say that calling this “hate” actually kind of makes sense, because afterward, she said, “Why are all these people here so focused on denying the Holocaust? Why are these people so focused on a Jewish conspiracy in America? What does that have to do with loving your own? That’s hate.” And I didn’t have a good answer. . . . And that led to some conversations where I started seeing things from a different perspective that I hadn’t when I was growing up and when I was just talking to people for whom that was totally normal.

To make a long story short, after about two years of Shabbat dinners, Matthew Stevenson realized that Derek Black's thinking had changed.

If it had been a big argument, I would've had statistics, I would have misused social science, and I would have not changed their mind and not changed my own mind, but I would've at least known what was going on. I think the real thing that happened, where I was just at a Shabbat dinner for two years, and I had to say, "Well, I think my ideology is very anti-Semitic." "Maybe I like this dinner, though." That's a conflict.

It's worth listening to the whole episode, because the story is complex. But I bring it up today because this model of reaching out in friendship to deplorable people seems like one way to resist the adversarial positions we have to take politically. And if the Hebrew slaves had suffered dehumanization as slaves in Egypt, so we today are threatened by a society that reduces human beings to net worth or some kind of tribal membership. The beginning of the story of the Ten Commandments tells us that our primary identity is as the beloved community, freed from slavery and charged with freeing our sisters and brothers.

Let us pray. Liberating God, we thank you for the vision of your reign, given in your Law. May we see our opportunities to knock windows into our walls and discover our connectedness with ever more of your people, until we all live in peace. Amen.

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