

Follow the Rules...? Creation 5 – 04 October 2020

All my life I have been a rule follower. My parents instilled in me that I needed to follow the rules, unswervingly and unceasingly. This was echoed, once I started school. And I was raised to respect authority. Now, to be fair, sometimes, the line between rules and behaviour was blurred. I was frightened of my Kindergarten teacher Mrs. Gumb. She absolutely terrified me. I was also attending school at a time when the London Board of Education (Ontario) was trying some new, experimental learning systems.

In the Kindergarten classroom, we were apart from the rest of the school. We had different times in the school yard and different lunch times. The common educational edict was that children in Kindergarten should be self-motivated. In other words, we were given "options" but not "forced" to do any one thing or activity. So, for most of the school year I would sit in the corner and play by myself. The teacher invited me to join the rest of the class in an activity, and I politely declined, as I preferred to be alone.

My report card indicated that I "did not play well with others". And I was "a loner". And I'm the same to this day. Given the choice between joining a group and staying on my own, guess which one I'll choose?

Which brings me to the reading for today. Exodus 20, but not all of it.
Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20

To read the selection as chosen leaves out some pretty nasty stuff.

Verse 5

"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me".

Verses 10 and 11 talk about creation over 6 days and the 7th day being set apart as Sabbath and made holy.

The language is very interesting. They are called the Ten Commandments, yet the wording is "Shall", not "Must". And if you look at the original Hebrew or Greek translation the language gets even more complicated, when looking at second person possessive and moral imperatives.

In Kindergarten the rule was that you should participate, but no child was ordered or forced to. Most children did participate, for fear of repercussions from the teacher. Not me. Now, had Mrs. Gumb told me that I had to participate, I would have. Had she ordered me, I'd have done as I was told.

Let's look again at the Commandments. That missing 5th verse makes the Commandments seem more like suggestions. The 5th verse is the teeth in the section. If you do not do as you are told to do, God will punish you. And not just you, but your children and grandchildren, to the 4th generation. Harsh! Then, in the 6th verse, the tone softens, "but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments".

To paraphrase, the commandments are that you shall:

1. not make an image of God (because that is idolatry)
2. not bow down and worship that image (again, idolatry)
3. not blaspheme (that's what Jesus was convicted of)
4. take a day off (Sabbath)
5. do what your parents tell you
6. not kill
7. not mess around with people who are not your spouse
8. not take stuff that isn't yours
9. not lie
10. not long or yearn for other people's stuff

But we're not done yet with today's reading.

Verses 18-21

"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, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was".

I mean really, the people are given the tablets, God's commandments.

Remember, this is the second set of tablets. The first set got broken when Moses threw them on the ground after realising that the people had already broken a few of the commandments before he returned from receiving them. Aaron's golden calf ring a bell?

So the people are already a bit unnerved, when Moses goes up to the mountain a second time, and returns with a new set of Commandments. Thunder and lightning, the sound of a trumpet and a smoking mountain; these things all terrified them. They were terrified of God and told Moses this.

And Moses' reply? "Don't be afraid, the sound and light show is to test you, and to scare you so that you follow the rules". Leading by fear. Doesn't sound productive, particularly, does it?

Jesus knew that the people struggled with the ten separate commandments, and so he reduced them to two "simple" commandments. Say them with me...

Love the Lord your God.

Love your neighbour, as yourself.

Because you see, if you love your neighbour, you aren't likely to lie to or about them. You aren't likely to steal from them, or mess around with their spouse, or yearn for their stuff. Right?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th Century theologian, struggled with the concept of good versus evil. He was an avowed pacifist and a Lutheran theologian, scholar and professor of the Confessing Church during the time of Adolph Hitler. Bonhoeffer's twin sister was married to a Jew and sensing impending incarceration and possible death for them, he got his

sister and brother-in-law out of Germany before the Third Reich took complete control of Germany and most of Europe.

He knew, as a pastor, that he could not stand by while innocent people were rounded up and killed. And yet, he also knew that killing was wrong.

He was recruited to be a spy for the Allies and, through diplomatic means, was able to travel freely to America, Europe and Britain to let them know what was actually happening, not the propaganda that Hitler and his Army were promoting. Bonhoeffer was further recruited to participate with a small group in an assassination plan for Hitler.

A young German soldier volunteered to a suicide mission. He was given a pen loaded with explosive that if deployed would kill Hitler, and likely those standing closest to him, including the soldier. The pen failed, the plan was uncovered and Bonhoeffer, along with the rest of the group, were arrested and imprisoned.

Prior to and during his incarceration, Bonhoeffer wrote extensively in what has become known as his book Ethics. In it, he struggles with death being arbitrary or deliberate. He draws distinctions between killing an enemy in a time of war and killing a criminal in self-defence.

At a very deep level, Bonhoeffer expressed that taking a life is against God's will, and yet, if the taking of one life spares the lives of many, is that killing justified?

Such was the premise for his involvement in the assassination attempt. While imprisoned, he continued to write and these writings were published after his death. During his time incarcerated, he was at Tegel prison for 18 months, then transferred to Flossenburg Concentration camp where he was hanged at dawn on the 9th of April, merely two weeks before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

God gave us ten rules with which to live our best lives. Jesus summarized them into two rules for life, both revolving around love. Ideally, we follow the rules as best we can, because we know it is the right thing to do, not because we are afraid of the punishment, should we break these rules.

My Dad used to tell me always to follow the rules. After a particularly heated disagreement with a teacher in high school, I pleaded my case to my Dad. He listened carefully, shrugged his shoulders and said "always follow the rules, unless the rules are unjust; then you must work to change the rules". This advice has stayed with me.

We see these rules reflected in our society. At one time, it was commonplace to keep slaves and there were passages in the Bible which were quoted to keep favour with slave-owners. Then the abolitionist movement gained traction and slavery was defeated.

At one time it was illegal for women to own property or vote. She was considered her husband's property and had no rights of her own. Then the suffrage movement gained traction and women earned the vote.

At one time, it was considered socially appropriate to make derogatory comments and discriminate openly against immigrants, people of colour, indigenous peoples and those

for whom English was a second or subsequent language. Slowly, society is turning against these practises with Black Lives Matter, and Truth & Reconciliation Commission. There is still a long way to go to abolish the practices of systemic xenophobia, homophobia, racism and sexism.

The way through is to remember the summary of the law. Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself. Because if I love you, what is important to you, is important to me. If I find myself in a place of privilege, it is inherent upon me to speak up and speak out.

As society has evolved and changed and laws have been overturned, we still have a lot of work to do. Yet, I believe if we follow the Ten Commandments and especially, if we follow the summary of the law, we will find a way forward.

A way towards full equality. To a society were everyone is treated the same, not one group better than another. The same.

That we remember we are loved, as God has loved us. And we are loved as God created us. Equal and the picture of perfection. Not as society sees perfection, but as God sees perfection reflected in us as we are a reflection of God.

Let us use love to find a way to correct the unjust and unfair rules. Let love be that way.

Amen.

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Creation IV
Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20