

Exodus 20:1-20

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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. 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 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.

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.'

Matthew 5:1-16

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Jokingly, Jesus Was Serious”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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It is a profound thought. Anne LaMott said it. I think that someone asked her, why are we here, what is our purpose? And she answered, "If we are not giving and receiving every day, we become a stagnant pool of pinch and grab, which is hell." Profound, I think. And then this week I met Dedra. A Denver area teacher contacted me, said that her students are in an American history class and they're studying the effects of religion. Wanted to know if I would be open to being interviewed by phone by one of the students. The questions I would be asked are, What is God? What does it mean to be a good Christian? Why do people kill in the name of religion? Why are we here? What is our purpose?

Tuesday afternoon a young woman, tenth-grader, Dedra called. She seemed very nice, kind of shy. Asked the questions, no follow-up. When we finished, she thanked me for giving her my time, and she was prepared to hang up when I said to her, "Dedra, could I ask you a couple of questions?" There was a long pause, and she said "Yes." I said, "What do you think our purpose here is?" And she said, "I think we are put here to learn our lesson, to pass a test, and one of the ways we pass our test is to help other people as they try to pass theirs." I said, "I think that's a really great answer. Have you ever thought about being a pastor of a church or a religious leader?" There was a long pause and she said, "No." and I said, "Maybe that's your test." And she hung up.

What a great answer she gave. The idea that we are put here to pass a test, to learn a lesson, and to make it easier for others to pass their tests, to learn their lessons. This morning what I hope to begin to explore is the core of what we are about as human beings. As people of God, to see if we can understand some of why we are put here. And I want to take seriously two heroes of our faith. What is our purpose? Why are we here, seriously? First of all, we are here to obey the law, to learn to obey the law. Now, some laws are not worthy of being obeyed. Like the law in Kansas that says when two trains approach each other at a crossing, they shall both come to a full stop, and neither shall start up again until the other is gone. Anybody from Waterloo, Nebraska?

There's a law on the books in Waterloo, Nebraska that says it's illegal for any barber in that town to eat onions between 7AM and 7PM. I would think that might be difficult to enforce. I grew up in a lawyer's family. I was a pre-law student, in fact. My grandfather was a lawyer, and his law partner was my uncle. I pretty much have heard all the lawyer

jokes, but this one's new to me. A lawyer was cross-examining a coroner in court. "Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?" "No." "Did you check for blood pressure?" The doctor said "No." "Then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy." And the doctor said "No." "How can you be so sure?" And the doctor said, "Because his brain was in a jar sitting on my desk." "But doctor, could the patient have still been alive nevertheless?" And the doctor said, "I suppose it is possible that he could still have been alive practicing law somewhere." I'll hear it from the lawyers.

Part of our purpose, why we are here, is to obey the law in the world that is, laws that make sense. Moses laid down the law. He came down the mountain and he laid down the law, the commandments. He told us "Thou shalt not." In the world that is what it is, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not make graven images, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not take the name of God in vain. We think about Moses. Life was a test for him. The story of Moses is familiar to us. The baby in the basket in the bulrushes, we know the story. The drama that comes as you think about your past, and at least in the legend, you hear the story, that there was Pharaoh out to kill you, wanted you dead, the fight he got in with the Egyptian who was harassing a Jew, and he killed him, and there was a price on his head. And then the call of God, to speak for God, and Moses had this stuttering problem and he thought people would not listen.

There's a movie, it's a great movie apparently, *The King's Speech*. How many of you have seen the movie? It's about King George, Elizabeth's father. It was wartime, and he needed to be able to speak clearly in order to inspire his people, and so he worked with a speech therapist. That's what the movie is about, and his stuttering, the speech therapist realized, was the result of a childhood trauma, perhaps his relationship with his father. He could speak clearly when he learned to overcome his past. The king's speech, like Moses, who had to overcome his past, and he saw the burning bush and then, in Joseph Campbell's words, he followed his bliss. And he went to the mountain and he got the commandments and he came down the mountain and he laid down the law.

Why are we put here? We have to know the rules. We have to have some idea what's right and what's wrong, so that when we're wrong, we know that we're wrong, so the next time we can make it right, we can do better. In the world that is, the law sings of the rhythm of life. It gives us a baseline. I have heard theologians refer to this as the sense of up-againstness. The theologian Bergson said our earliest memory any of us have is the taste of forbidden fruit. We know original sin. We know original blessing. But we also know original freedom, which is why we need the law to help us cope with the world that is. I don't often quote bishops, hardly ever quote our own. I've got authority issues. In forty-one years of ministry, I never let a bishop or district superintendent buy me lunch. I don't like to owe them. Mostly, I mock their authority. But this bishop we have, her name is Elaine. About ten days ago, I was in her office, and she said to me, "I have that plumline over in the corner of my office, most people don't even see it. Reminds me, when things get distorted, there's a straight line I have to measure my life against. Not what people think about me, not what people expect of me. And not the easiest choice." And I thought, "You know, for someone who has to make difficult decisions that affect

people's lives and churches' futures, it's good to know the plumbline, and good for us too."

The law, the world that is. Judy Sheindlin, Judge Judy, wrote a book. *Beauty Fades, Dumb is Forever*. In that book she writes, "I may come off on television as fearless, but there have been many occasions in my life when I have felt a glimmer of fear. I'll tell you, I'm much prouder of those times I've walked through them than I am of those times when I held back. I am far more satisfied with the outcome when I have bristled with confidence than when I have abdicated my needs and desires for the sake of being liked." Or as one woman told me this week, a member of our church, a hero in fact, who is dying, who said, "Looking back, I have made good decisions." The law, for the world that is. Moses laid down the law. Moses was serious, deadly serious.

Secondly, Jesus presented some thoughts on the world of "what if." His life was similar to Moses, when you think about it. Both of them were threatened by death by the powers that were, according to the legend. Matthew tells us that Herod, we're told, wanted Jesus dead. Pharaoh, we understand from the tradition, was out to get Moses. Infant boys were on a list, according to the tradition. Mary and Joseph then took their son Jesus to Egypt, and Jesus, in a sense, came out of Egypt back to Bethlehem or Nazareth. Moses led the people out of Egypt to the promised land. Out of Egypt. Jesus died on the cross before he could fulfill his mission. It had to be finished by his disciples, and in a similar way, Moses never made it to the promised land, he died of natural causes. Moses went to the mountain and brought down the commandments. Jesus went to the mountain and brought the Beatitudes. Both brought to the world rules for living. Moses brought laws for the world of what is, Jesus brought Beatitudes for the world of what if. Beatitudes don't say, "Thou shalt not." Beatitudes do suggest "Blessed be." Attitudes to be, in a world of what if. What if the world where we lived was a world of love? What if the first could be last? What if the servant could be the ruler? What if humility could be seen as great? What if persuasion could be more powerful than coercion? What if the meek inherited the earth? What if those who suffer for what is right could be rewarded for being right? What if the poor in spirit were rich in fact? What if the pure in heart, who will only God's will, were most blessed? What if people who are the salt of the earth spoke up? What if people who are the light of the world wouldn't hide their light under a basket? What if we lived in a world where all the attitudes were Beatitudes?

Now, Jesus couldn't have gone up to the mount to preach that sermon if he hadn't known the law Moses laid down. Jesus couldn't have imagined the world of what if, if he hadn't had a good grasp of the world of what is. Our job is to be obedient to both. It's called radical obedience, according to Rudolf Bultmann, the theologian, Carl Michaelson said, the question may be asked, but how can we love if it is commanded of God? To which I answer, "How can we love if it were not commanded by God?" Craig Barnes wrote a book, *When God Interrupts*, title of the book. He said, "On the other side of abandonment, all of life becomes an expression of gratitude. The journey through loss is long and filled with pain. It costs us our lives. At the bottom of abandonment, the only thing that is left is the love of God but, to be alone with the love of God is the only way to find life." To live as if that were true, to live the Beatitudes Jesus spoke.

Did you hear the story about the experimental airplane that was on its first flight? Reporters, journalists loaded aboard? Several minutes into the flight the captain's voice is heard. "I'm delighted to be your pilot, the captain of this airplane on this historic flight. I can tell you now that the flight is going well. However, the passengers sitting on the right side, if you look out the window you can see that engine is vibrating slightly, but not to worry- we are flying at 62,000 feet, and 1,050 miles an hour as planned. But on the left side, the people on the left side of the aircraft, you might notice that that engine is glowing. More accurately, one could say, burning. Wait a minute, it just fell off. Not to worry. But there is something that is of some concern. Those of you seated in the aisle, you may notice a crack that's appeared, and some of you looking through that crack are now seeing the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. And for those of you who have really good eyes, you might notice a small lifeboat on those waves. Again, this is your captain speaking. The technology is such that the aircraft, ladies and gentlemen, I am speaking to you from that lifeboat, and I will bring this plane back down to the airport by the remote control device I have that looks an awful lot like what you use on your television sets."

The Beatitudes put us in a world of what if, and thus, what if God is not a distant commander, but an intimate presence? What if God is not in the raft, safe below us, when our lives are up in the air? What if God is not high and lifted up above us when we pray to face what we cannot overcome? What if God is not only in the quiet moments of meditative peace, in the worship center when the colored glass casts rainbow prisms of light, but what if God is in the true grit of our personal lives as well as the incensed cloud of our prayer life? It's real, it's so very real. It's a what if that makes the world what it could be, and supposes that we might help life into it.

Teilhard de Chardin said, "What we are all more or less lacking at this moment is a new definition of holiness. Jesus brought it." James Moore tells the story of the campus minister, his name is Larry, and he was in Florida during spring break. All the students there in Florida-- not so much wholesomeness goes on there, frankly. And there was a student from Michigan wearing a t-shirt that had on the front of it the words "Help stamp out virginity." He walked up to the student and he said, "I like your t-shirt, help stamp out virginity." The student said, "Thank you." He said, in fact, I like that t-shirt so much, I want to make a suggestion. When you get back home, I would suggest maybe you take that t-shirt off very carefully, that you fold it neatly, that you put it in a sturdy box and throw in some moth balls and wrap it up with tissue paper. Put it away in a safe place and some years from now, when you're married, and that first young man comes over to take your daughter out for her first date, that you open up that box and give him that t-shirt." The student looked at Larry and turned and ran down the beach, upset. Later that day Larry saw the young man again, but he wasn't wearing that t-shirt. He was wearing a green t-shirt that had the words Michigan State written on it, and he walked over to Larry and said, "Mister, I don't know who you are, but I want you to know that I burned that t-shirt. I guess I really hadn't thought it through." The world of what if.

The Beatitudes have thought it through. They bring us closer to God. What if God is present in the relationships we have? We don't use people then. In the words of Martin

Buber, God is I-Thou. God is in the stranger, in the neighbor, in the enemy. See, that means we're very careful with the way we act, and we treat each person with reverence and respect, and we take care to express the gentleness of spirit that Jesus had when he brought comfort to the afflicted and we avoid being loud in our condemnation or rude in our manner or arrogant in the way in which we share our passion, because Beatitude. God's in the words we speak, God is here is them. God is present in the things we do when no one else is, when we're alone. God is in the darkest hour. Blessed are those who mourn. God is in our highest joy. Blessed are those who are cheerful and humble. God in in our quest for what is right. Blessed are those who are persecuted for it.

Bernice King spoke of her father's dream and how he said, "We've got to learn to live together." Black and white, Easterner, Westerner, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Jew, because we're a family, and we're unduly separated by ideas and culture and interests. Somehow we have to learn to live with each other in peace. And then Bernice said, "This is ambitious, but God did not put us here to dream small dreams and perform insignificant deeds." Radical obedience. Jesus is serious. We live as if God is here. Beatitudes. Moses laid down the law, helping us with the world of what is. Jesus brought us Beatitudes that help us with the world of what if. And so when we ask ourselves the question, "Why are we here? What is our purpose?" seriously, the answer is obvious. Jesus and Moses. Commandments and Beatitudes. We are put here to obey them. Let us pray.

It is the law that commands us to take the world that we have and live in it. It is the Gospel that inspires us to live the world as it could become. O God, help us be attentive to both. Amen.