

At bible study this week with St. Giles we talked at length about how there has been a push lately for the 10 Commandments to be placed and displayed in classrooms in certain states, ours included. Places like Alabama, Louisiana and Texas have seen certain advocacy groups and lawmakers push for the display as an attempt to do things such as bring God back into school, instill a moral code into students...there are a number of reasons for doing this. And people generally have strong feelings one way or another about this issue and there are lots of ways to talk about the appropriateness of mandating putting such a text in a classroom. For one thing, we could have this conversation as partisans, choosing our position based on our political preferences. Or, we can talk about this as people of faith who want to see the Good News shared with everyone and are seeking how to do this in a modern world. I think the best approach for us is to choose the latter option especially since it ties in nicely with our gospel today where Jesus instructs his followers to follow his commandments if they love him.

Because the ten commandments are a part of our faith language, they are right and good, a guide to living with one another. We would be in a much better world if we all followed these for they are relational commandments: Serve God before all other gods, don't physically harm one another, don't harm your neighbor reputation, respect your parents, don't desire your neighbor's things, be faithful to your spouse. Commandments are essential, because they provide the healthy and good boundaries in which we are to live with one another. But are they enough? Are the commandments, not just the ten but every commandment found throughout scripture enough to make and keep us faithful?

No. They are not. More is needed, and the truth is, more is given to us by God and more is asked by God. And this is what I mean; As part of our conversation at bible study the inevitable comparison of the Hebrew Scriptures, arose which is:

Christians often understand as being a reflection of an angry, punitive God, fixated on the commandments compared with the New Testament and its emphasis on love. This is a false dichotomy. Yes, there are portions of the Hebrew texts that do emphasize the rules, and lean on the consequences of sin, where the commandments are front and center. But they rest within a greater body of scripture that includes the prophets who describe in great detail God's desire for God's people, God's yearning for goodness and righteousness in the world, God's hunger for God's people to yearn for God in the same way with the same passion. The prophets talk about a God who is steadfast, who loves God's people in spite of their infidelity. There is the story of Jonah, a minor prophet who throws and absolute fit that God sends him to his enemies to warn them of God's judgement and when they repent and turn to God, Jonah gets even more petulant because God loves these people whom Jonah is struggling to even like. These prophets and the whole of the Hebrew scriptures talk about a God who enters again and again into covenant with humanity, a relationship based on mutual trust and fidelity no matter how fickle humanity is. Within our stories of God there is so much more than just the commandments. So much more. There is first a relationship that is sought, willingly by both God and human, and this begins long before any commandment, long ago in the garden when God made humanity for Godself, and humans for each other, to dwell together all out of love. And this is how Jesus understands God through these same texts.

Look to our gospel today as we continue where we left off last week: Jesus is gathered with his friends for the last evening, and he is saying goodbye to them and giving him the last commandments he will give them. He says to them: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments..." If you love me, you will keep my

commandments. And what are the commandments that Jesus gives his friends? In John it is this one: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Love is what is being commanded here but it is a commandment that invites one into a relationship, into the same love Jesus has shown to his disciples in his ministry with them and will show them in his dying for them and for the world. John is a gospel full of commitment and passion: love is expressed through this text, in the relationship between Jesus, Martha, Mary and Lazarus who care for and grieve for one another; in Jesus’ love for his mother and for the beloved disciple as Jesus gives them to one another to be family just before he dies. In John, God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son....

And so, I find the selection of the ten commandments to be an odd choice of scripture by Christians to post in schools. It is fundamentally a Jewish text and while we consider it to be part of our own tradition and our own understanding of scripture, we tend to read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, which means we read these things entirely differently than how they were understood by ancients Jews and now by modern Jews. Why wouldn’t we use Jesus’ commandments from Matthew: “The first command is to love God with all your heart, mind and soul and the second is like it; love your neighbor as yourself, on this hang all the law and the prophets.” This would be more appropriate for these two commandments hold the key to understanding all commandments because Jesus is the interpretive lens through which we, Christians are to understand scripture, the commandments, everything. It is God’s love that Jesus embodies and uses to interpret the scriptures. We need to be mindful of this because the trap humans fall into so often is that it is easy to love the commandments and forget that they are a tool for and expression of loving God. And when we do, it gets ugly.

And essay¹ on Julian of Norwich was sent to me this past week and it pointed out that Julian who wrote Revelations of Divine Love, did so in a time of terror. The Black Death had been moving through Europe, the Peasants' Revolt, a popular uprising of people who were discontent with the social arrangements of the day, namely a poll tax, but also policies of the day.² It was not a time one would find it easy to write about love...because at first glance it may seem so inadequate. But Julian had profound vision of Christ that changed her. It lead to Julian pushing the bounds of what was understood as orthodox in the church, her writing was not theological in an academic or dogmatic way, but it was certainly in the mystical tradition, deeply passionate, deeply loving, deeply real, but in a way some, perhaps many, would find heretical. In the same essay, the author briefly introduces Henry Despenser, the Bishop of Norwich, as a kind of defender of orthodoxy, of right belief, the "Fighting Bishop" who crushed the Peasant Rebellion. He is Julian's opposite. He was among those who killed those who didn't believe in the same way, or in the correct manner. Heresy wasn't tolerated at this time and the way of dealing with it was making someone retract their "errant" beliefs or if that didn't work, imprisoning the heretic or executing them. , But they are good examples of what it looks like to love loves God, or love the commandments more. Which one do you think is which?

The question was asked at bible study: Do you love God? Of course we will all say yes, but then the next question must follow: If so, how do you love God? With a real, tangible relationship with the Creator, where the commandments of God, read through the lens of love are at work in your life? Or do you love the commandments and make them the focal point, an identity, a way forward without

¹ Not really able to footnote this essay...don't have enough information currently.

² <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peasants-Revolt>

grounding them in love, justice, the life of Jesus, in selflessness and resurrection? These are questions we all must ask ourselves. Because without love, the commandments become weapons, they become rote practices that fail to lead to transformation, to connection and wholeness, they feed our need to be right rather than be righted. Love is the whole point of them, of this, of everything. As Julian writes at the end of her Revelations: “Wouldst thou learn thy Lord’s meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love was His meaning. Who showed it thee? Love. What showed He thee, Love. Wherefore was it showed? For Love. Julian, the prophets, countless mystics and the very life of Jesus tells us it was all and is all for love. No matter where we are, if the world is glorious and bright or crumbling and broken, Love remains because it has always been, it will always be, and it will carry us further into more love.