

How 2 Equals 10: Jesus and the Ten Commandments

June 10, 2018

1st Commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20:1-6 and Matthew 22:34-40*

This week we hosted a four day program for 7 through 12 year olds called ROOTS, and it is so named by the founders, Scott and Dorothy Blum, because the program teaches art and theater and movement and song and story and dance and rhythm: all sensory activities that are foundational and ROOTS for our being human: Physically expressive entities. The ROOTS program has now been hosted by Trinity for 6 of its 19 years of rooting children in our community in the arts – and it was a fantastic experience for me again to see youngsters soaking up all that the instructors had to offer – especially after lunch when Gonzalo did Zumba with us every day!!

ROOTS are important – having a good grounding makes all the difference for plants and trees: roots that can derive nourishment from soil and send out tentacles that can grab the ground and serve to stabilize the growing stalk and branches. Becoming ROOTED in music and art is important for young lives as they seek to actualize all that is created within them, and connect meaningfully with the world. And ROOTS are important for spiritual growing and health as well. Here at Trinity we strive to provide strong faith ROOTS for our young people – and this weekend we celebrate two of our fantastic high school graduates – both of which have been nourished in faith and relationship with God and God’s people and are deeply rooted in God’s love. Jackie and Miranda will take our love and prayers with them as they move out into the world to learn and grow in their chosen paths...and we know that God will be right in front of them every step of the way, because that is what they have learned in this place – from you: watching how you live and listening to your witness over the years.

ROOTS are a big deal for lives of faith – and not just at the beginning, for children and young people. Deepening ROOTS of faith matter throughout our lives, and you and I both know that the moment we neglect tending to the faith rooted in us it ceases to grow and starts to fall dormant. So here we are, back again to the 10 commandments of the Hebrew people and the Two commandments of Jesus. Together, in our world of faith, these commandments constitute the taproot. Horticulturists know that if the taproot of an organism is healthy, the entire system has a chance for health – but compromise the taproot and what happens? Nothing else gets proper nourishment and vitality is threatened! So we begin today a period of time where we will focus together on this taproot of our faith. Today we start with the first of the Ten Commandments – and Jesus’ two. But next week we will jump forward to the 4th commandment...for obvious reasons that will be clear. However, we will cover each of the commandments before concluding, so if you miss a week here or there, be sure to pick up a copy of the sermon the next week - or come to Tuesday worship – so that you can get the full coverage! And most likely, our exploration of the commandments will not be like anything you have done before. My intent is that at the end of this series, not only will you be able to remember all of them...but have specific ways that they impact your daily life in a new or renewed way!

Before we turn to the first of the Ten Commandments, I want to address our scripture from the Gospel of Matthew. For Matthew’s timetable, these words are spoken by Jesus during the last week of his life. He has already ridden into the Holy City on the donkey, hailed with Hosannas. He has cleansed the temple and now he is back – on a different day – teaching and answering questions. He has just done a number on the Sadducees, the Jewish religious leaders who did not believe in the resurrection, trying to trip Jesus up with a question about who would be married to whom in the resurrection. And so a Pharisee takes a shot at Jesus – Teacher, he asks, which is the great commandment in the Law?

Jesus doesn’t hesitate a moment: You shall love the lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Boom. Love God, Love each other!

Because you have probably heard these words before, they will not have the impact for you that they would have had for the first century Jewish religious leader. And the Pharisee would not have been too surprised to hear Jesus proclaim that loving God with one’s entire being was the greatest commandment. It was a part of the Shema – the words of Deuteronomy 6 that a good Jew would say daily on rising: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.” Only Jesus doesn’t stop there! He claims a second great command – one that would have been shocking to hear as second runner up: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. In that simple conversation

Jesus sums up all his ministry and teaching to focus with laser precision on what he wanted to make clear: RELATIONSHIP – loving God and loving what God loves is the simple expectation Jesus holds out.

We talk a lot about how God loves us, but not so much about how we love God – have you noticed that? It turns out that I made it back in time from sabbatical to take in Pastor Doug’s final class on the study of Marcus Borg’s book – the heart of Christianity. And wouldn’t you know, the very topic of the class was how we love God – concrete ways that our lives become fuller and fuller with love for God. It is simple, Borg says. Pay attention to God! And how does one do that, you ask? Borg is very practical. He gives five specific practices that assist us in paying attention to God. 1) Be part of a church community where you worship and have opportunity to study and grow in faith with other, 2) Pray – including petition and intercession where you plead for God’s help and Thanksgiving where you expound your gratitude, meditation and contemplation which are times to be silent and listen in the presence of the holy; 3) A Daily Discipline – as mundane and ordinary as that may sound, having a specific time that is set aside for paying attention to God every day in reading the Bible or devotional book, and remembering God throughout the day by making the sign of the cross as a reminder of your baptism, singing or sharing the story of your faith with another or showing hospitality or keeping Sabbath or caring for God’s creation in a concrete way – all of these daily disciplines keep your attention focused on God and are little acts of loving God. 4) Christian friendship – having a friend or two with whom you can share intimately about your Christian journey and talk together about what God is doing in your life and last but certainly not least 5) Engage in compassion and/or justice work for the community and world – do something to help those in need be restored to joy and wholeness or endeavor to correct the social illnesses that create injustice. Concretely extending ourselves for people we don’t know who are not part of our family or friendship circle is loving God – even as we love those who God loves!

Paying attention to God and living with compassion and justice toward those whom God loves is what Jesus says God desires from us. Matter of fact, Jesus says that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on those two commands!” They constitute EVERYTHING!!!

So, you might say, why bother with the 10 if we have the two? Why not just stick with these and ruminate on them more? For me, the answer to that question lies in transforming how we treat the Ten Commandments themselves. For a large chunk of religious history, the commandments were seen legalistically – as rules not to be broken. Do this, don’t do that...leading to a minimalist attitude of keeping the “letter” of the law but not keeping the “spirit” from which the law gained its energy. As we engage in our study of the Ten Commandments in the coming weeks, we will be expanding our understanding of the “spirit” that gives them energy, and subsequently their life-transforming capability. We will be holding each up to Jesus’ teaching and modeling, examining carefully how each commandment has relevance and power for our lives every day.

You might think I haven’t left much time for visiting the first commandment in this sermon. Truth is, I have been talking about the first commandment the entire time. It is “You shall have no other gods before me”. We have taken that to mean that as long as we put God first, we can line up anything else we want to after God in descending order. Priority. God first. I would like to suggest to you an alternative understanding of this command. A couple of tiny Hebrew words are put together and we translate them “Before” Al pana. But an alternate, and I suspect more faithful translation is not about priority...having God first in a long line of many. Rather Al pana can mean “in one’s face”. Have no other God except me IN YOUR FACE! Not just first, so that my obligation can be met and I can move on to whatever else collects my attention – but making God the only thing that is in front of my face! Oh, does that change the meaning or what?

The reason that the first commandment is the first commandment, I think, must be that it is the most important – and Jesus confirms that! Loving God with all our heart and soul and mind – placing God before my face always, so that whether I am in worship or in line at the grocery store I am looking first at God as I gaze on my purchases or my neighbor – that is a bit of a life-changer!

In essence, it is what this life of following Jesus is all about. Loving God and loving what God loves. So simple, and yet we will spend our whole lives learning, with the Spirit’s aid, how freeing and fulfilling this can be! Amen.

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