THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Good Gift* Psalm 19

When asked to recite the Ten Commandments, most people will search their memories for a list of “thou shalts” and “thou shalt nots,” from Exodus, chapter 20, verses 2-17. For those of us who are doing that right now, here is that passage:

*2I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me.*

*4You 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. 5You 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, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*

*8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But 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. 11For 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.*

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

*13 You shall not murder.*

*14 You shall not commit adultery.*

*15 You shall not steal.*

*16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*17 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.*

As it was pointed out to me a few days ago, most of us get the first one wrong. We start out with the ones that pertain to our relationship with others and forget that the very first commandment is *“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.”* [Exodus 20:1] After that come all of the “thou shalts” and “thou shalt nots.” That is what most of us think of when we think of how God has called upon us to live; when we think of the “golden rule.” We think of the Ten *Command-*ments. Mostly, we think of these principles for living as commands, commands that limit human behavior—which can be a good thing—but still, the whole concept of a “command” is that of limit, control. While opposition to this may seem an exclusively modern concern, apparently one day, very long ago, someone thought about our relationship with God and decided all this needed to be said differently.

Once upon a time, the writer of Psalm 19 sat down in (what I can only imagine was a) state of wonder, gratitude, and inspiration as he reflected on God’s laws, and composed the lines we have just sung and heard read to us. Never once does the psalmist-poet forget the source of all creation and creatures. Never once does she miss as opportunity to proclaim God’s glory.

*“1The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork”* begins the poet, and all through that line and the next three verses, nature praises God. Indeed, creation’s praise is constant—by day, it sings an unending song of joyful beauty, while at night nature’s song turns into more a solemn voice of knowledge.

The poet also acknowledges God’s dominion over the sun. At God’s direction the sun’s course through the heavens is set, its shelter constructed by God, its strength is resolute and untiring. Its heat, inescapable.

It is truly unfortunate that we do not know the identity of the writer. What we do know is that whoever it was had to have been a theologian—that is just obvious. What is more surprising, though, is that the writer also had to have been a poet of some distinction. How else would s/he have been able to expound in such sensitive, graceful language about something that is not often described in such glowing terms.

…*The Law.* The Torah—God’s law. That is what the poet is extolling. However, instead of a list of prohibitions and/or permissions, here in Psalm 19, the poet invites us to hear God’s torah in a new way. We are invited to know and understand God’s laws as a gift to all humankind.

Starting in verse 7, the poet shifts his attention from nature to God’s torah and tells us that, just like the sun and the heavens, God’s torah is perfect. What is important here is that the perfection of the law is not in its ability or emphasis on controlling or limiting human beings. God’s torah is perfect because it

*7reviv*(es) *the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
   making wise the simple;*

In other words, God’s laws are meant as a gift to humankind. What the poet of this psalm wants to sing and teach us is that God’s law is meant to establish order between human beings and God, and within the human community, too. God’s laws, says the poet, are “right,” “clear,” “pure,” and “enduring.” They are “true” and are more valuable than fine gold; sweeter than honey in the comb.

All of this is true because God’s torah—in this psalm, in the Ten Commandments, and throughout the Bible—is meant to provide us with an understanding of ourselves as interrelated; in relationship with God and with one another.

Just like the hymns we sing and the psalms we have been singing, we each have our part to sing in order to express a whole musical piece. The music-poetry on the page makes a space among other voices and instruments for our voice to be used and heard. This is what God’s torah is meant to accomplish in our lives, too.

In fact, as I was writing these lines what occurred to me was the scene from *The Sound of Music* when Maria teaches the children to sing. In the movie, the small band of children and governess skip along through the streets and meadows of Salzburg singing of how just a few musical tones have given them a whole universe of music to sing, to create, to celebrate, and to rejoice in.

We do not think of the law in that way very often, and while this is quite understandable when it comes to human laws, God’s laws are entirely different. They really are like music because they ask us to enter into community with God and with each other in a way that can create an environment of honesty and respect. Such an environment assumes that each person is worthy of the truth—ie. of respectful and honorable treatment. To live with these things cannot help but bring calm to the heart and spirit—and to our relationships.

In our context, political concerns seem to be more important than mutual respect and truthfulness these days, and the only antidote that I can think of is in the very first of the Ten Commandments, and in all fourteen of the verses of Psalm 19: *“I am the Lord your God.”*

It takes humility and a sincere desire to serve to accept God’s authority and trustfulness above all others. However, when power is the objective, truth becomes harder to find. When humility becomes the rarest of human characteristics then trust is broken as are lives, communities, and nations. Humility is what allows us to receive the authority of God. It allows us to value our role in service to others and to those values of honesty, truth, generosity, and compassion. This is the gift that God wants us to have—they very gift the psalmist-poet celebrates and praises.

Here, on the third Sunday of Lent, we are asked to listen to the words of a poet who, long ago, recognized the gift humans have been given in the God who revealed and continues to reveal God’s-self through acts of love that rescue and save, that even nature proclaims, and who even offers God’s own self to us. May we, with outstretched hands and open hearts, receive this gift and give thanks. Amen.