

Message: "When Faith Becomes Authoritarian"

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

20Then God spoke all these words: 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. 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. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You 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. ¹⁸When 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, ¹⁹and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." ²⁰Moses 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."

Is anyone here as worried as I am about the decline in Christianity in our world today? Especially in our nation? A recent study by Pew Research reflected that in 1972, 92% of Americans identified as Christian; now only 64% do. 30% of the US population is now being classed as "religiously unaffiliated," while about 6% of Americans identified with Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Predictions forecast that by 2070 under 50% will identify as Christian - and the number of "religiously unaffiliated" Americans, or 'nones,' will probably outnumber those adhering to Christianity. Today, only 41% of Americans attend church regularly, and 57% of Americans are seldom or never in religious service attendance. These trends have been maintained for the last 50 years and are projected to continue for the foreseeable future.

If you're paying attention, you are probably worried about these trends - but what to do about it? Sing better hymns, have shorter sermons, build more comfortable pews, or serve better donuts in fellowship afterwards? Well, have no fear, for the great politicians of Texas have come up with a solution - mandating through legislation the posting of the ten commandments in each and every classroom in the state! Here's the text of Senate Bill 1515 as it came before the Texas state legislature this spring:

Sec.A1.0041.AA -- DISPLAY OF TEN COMMANDMENTS. (a) A public elementary or secondary school shall display in a conspicuous place in each classroom of the school a durable poster or framed copy of the Ten Commandments that meets the requirements of Subsection (b). (b) A poster or framed copy of the Ten Commandments described by Subsection (a) must: (1) include the text of the Ten Commandments as provided by Subsection (c) in a size and typeface that is legible to a person with average vision from anywhere in the classroom in which the poster or framed copy is displayed; and (2) be at least 16 inches wide and 20 inches tall.

Now there you go! That will stop the decline! It just warms the heart - forcing people to read the commandments of God, the ones we just read from Exodus chapter 20. I can almost hear the brakes squealing on the plunge in the number of Christians in our country, for there is no better way to evangelize than forcing people to believe the way we want them to.

Or will it have the opposite effect? Are not things like this actually promoting the decline, especially in our younger population?

I can resonate with the hope that people will recognize what is valuable and life giving about faith, but that's the first thing which is lost whenever a particular version of the divine or specific scripture or precise doctrine enters the domain of force, where it is used as a weapon to impose authentic discipleship. And today, here, in our passage, we have one of the most weaponized scriptures of all time - the ten commandments.

Now, this is, in one respect, completely understandable, for after all, these are commandments set forth by God. It is natural to think of commandments as dictates for behavior, as unapologetic requirements and standards for life that one disobeys at one's own peril. "Do this, or else!" follows the logic - and the "or else" is made as bad as possible; the consequences of our disobedience are too horrible to imagine, as outlined by the Biblical writers elsewhere in the Old Testament.

But, then, Jesus said something different about the commandments of God; he did not frame the commandments of God in terms of "do this or else!" but "do this and live." And there are worlds of difference between the two approaches.

It makes me think about my own determination to have my children obey the rules of our home when they were young. There were always two approaches. One approach was to express the task with conviction, sternness, and volume. For example, "Clean your room!" Nice, clear, strongly stated, direct, to the point -

where's the difficulty in that? None on my part, but a whole lot on theirs, for they were involved in such things as self-determination, running in hamster wheels of questioning, constantly testing the limits of my authority - you know, the kinds of things that make children adorable? Maybe not, but they are the kinds of things that make them real..... Barking orders, shouting loudly, threatening a nebulous punishment -- such approaches don't really work, let alone endure, in healthy relationships between parents and children. Where fear is the motivator, the subject is mostly thinking about escaping punishment or escaping from wrath, not a clean room.

"Do this, or else!" is a form of parental cop-out, I came to believe, especially when an alternative approach worked so much better on all sides. Not "Do this, or else!" but "Do this, for life works better this way" followed by an explanation of the reasons for doing so. For instance, cleaning the room became understood to our children as less a chore and more an opportunity for sanity and health once we chose to take the time to explain how it worked better for life to have a clean room - toys wouldn't get broken as much, you could find your bed to sleep in, bugs wouldn't be attracted to leftover food, and you'd be much less likely to step on the random leggo plastic blocks which have been documented to cause the highest degree of physical pain a human can experience when stepped upon a bare foot at night. Logic and reason are our friends here, and what works best for life is the most logical and reasonable thing to promote. It is the child who learns the value of a clean room who needs no rigid command to do so; and though it may take some time to explain and show the child that value, the lesson sticks for life, and more to the point, is worthy of life.

Move beyond clean rooms and the approach remains the same - realize the value of something, and no shouting is needed, no threat is warranted, the reason being that the request is understood for its intrinsic value. This is the same approach found in our scripture passage from Exodus, where the commandments of God are presented AFTER the pronouncement of God's provision for the people of Israel - from the text, "20Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" - " I am the God who saved you, who protected you, who desires you to live in abundance and freedom, as ones beloved and precious in my sight." It is the intrinsic value of God's love for us that is the greatest motivator of all. It's easy to miss those first few words of declaration, but they set the tone for the rest of the text, as if God is saying "for the sake of my love for you, and my desires to

see you live abundant lives, I place before you the ten things that will help your living." Much different than "Do this, or else!"

Jesus never promoted the idea of faith being used as a weapon of coercion or judgement; faith was a recognition of what constitutes goodness and compassion and justice and love, all the things God has made possible that are a part of life worth living, individually and in community. Jesus wields no sword of truth to cut down those who don't believe; God is not throwing lightning bolts of vindication to destroy those who question or doubt or even deny God's truth. God offers only love without condition, inviting the same in return. And once we embrace that love, God provides guidance for how to continue to live in that love.

I leave you with the words of Thomas G. Long *who is professor emeritus of preaching at Candler School of Theology*; he speaks of the contrasting freedom the ten commandments represent if we understand not only who puts them before us, but why. He says: "Understanding the Ten Commandments as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order—"Here are ten rules. Obey them!"—but instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). We will probably always refer to the declarations that follow as the "Ten Commandments," but we can also think of them as descriptions of the life that prevails in the zone of God's liberation. "Because the Lord is your God," the Decalogue affirms, "you are free not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land."

Freedom from murder, stealing, coveting, and deceit; freedom to respect each other, to rest, to help, and to love; freedom to know we are never alone, and have constant access to grace - this is the opposite of burdensome; this is how life is meant to be lived.