

**19 Pentecost  
October 15, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

What do you make of a God that is so angry at a group of people for being disloyal that he is willing to kill all of them? And what do you make of a king who forces folks to come to his party and then criticizes and punishes one of them for not being properly dressed? Does this sound like the God from whom you seek healing when you are ill, or the God from whom you seek solace when you are grieving? Does this sound like the God of unconditional love? Does this sound like the God that you worship?

The Israelites were anxious. They had lived under oppression in Egypt. Moses had led them to freedom through the Red sea while the Egyptian soldiers chased them. Then they had wandered in the wilderness. They ran out of food ... and Moses's God gave them manna. Then they ran out of water, and Moses hit a rock with the same staff that had divided the Red Sea, and the rock split and life-giving water had come forth. But the Israelites still were not entirely convinced. And when Moses went up a cloud covered mountain and came down with ten rules to live by ... as if this was going to rescue them out of the wilderness ... they still weren't convinced. Again, he went up the mountain to talk to his God. This time the anxiety was too much, and they convinced his brother Aaron to make a tangible idol ... a golden calf ... onto which they could project that anxiety.

Today, we, too, live in the midst of anxiety. Two hurricanes in two years. Wildfires destroying whole communities in California. A healthcare system in disarray. An economic structure where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The list goes on ... the anxiety is palpable.

In last week's First Lesson we heard the Ten commandments from the Book of Exodus. Now, twelve chapters later, we hear the story of what happened while Moses was up on the mountain. Those twelve chapters are worth re-reading, assuming that you have read them at one time or another. In a way they fill in the fine print for questions like, "What does it mean 'Do not steal'?"

I served as rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio for 15 years. The church was located in the Old West End, a neighborhood that when it was established in the late 1800s was at the end of the trolley line ...it was the city's first affluent suburb in its heyday as a glass, auto, and auto parts manufacturing area. In the early 1900s Toledo had been the home of Champion Spark plugs, Libby Glass, Willys-Overland (the forerunner of Jeep), and other major manufacturers of autos and auto parts. I would imagine that the titans of these industries were visitors to Henry Flagler's resort hotels here in St. Augustine.

But, by the end of the 1990s Toledo was in economic decline, and the Old West End was a neighborhood of former mansions, turned into multi-family rental dwellings. The adjacent neighborhoods can only be described as “inner-city” with the accompanying drugs and crime. St. Mark’s Church sat on the seam between this national historic district and the urban blight of a “rust belt” community. We had to have a security guard in the parking lot on Sundays ... and even then cars were stolen and broken into.

In spite of the social environment St. Mark’s Church was a thriving community known for its diversity and welcome to all who crossed its threshold. Sometimes this made for some interesting Sunday mornings. The large homes, and the low rents, of the Old West End made for perfect group homes to house the mentally ill and the high functioning developmentally challenged. St. Mark’s, with its open atmosphere ... and generous coffee hour ... seemed to attract a number of those who lived in these group homes.

There was Jim Grainger who would sometimes come into the church while I was preaching to a congregation of 200, walk right up the center aisle, and interrupt me to ask for a \$10 handout. There was David who was in his thirties and loved the music ... sometimes sitting in the chancel with the choir. However, David, a college graduate and former teacher was also schizophrenic, and when his medication levels were off he would talk to himself incessantly, often using profanity. Yet, fellow parishioners would gently encourage him to act appropriately, and he invariably complied. And then there was a man who called himself Jesus who would come in during the service, and no matter where we were in the liturgy he would walk up to the altar and kneel down to pray, then stand facing the congregation and make the sign of the cross, and quietly leave.

However, Zachary wasn’t mentally ill, just mentally challenged. Zachary ... Zachary was a large man in his fifties. He always wore a cowboy hat, and around his neck hung a Cadillac medallion on a sneaker shoelace. One Sunday morning, at the eight o’clock service, Zachary was one of about 25 parishioners listening to my sermon about the Ten Commandments when he blurted out, “Father, I’ve broken every commandment except one. Will God forgive me?” I really don’t remember what I had written for my sermon, but I know that whatever it was, it no longer had any meaning in the face of Zachary’s question.

Now, I’ve told this story a number of times, and the most frequently asked question I get is “What was the commandment that Zachary hadn’t broken?” I imagine that many of you may have the same question.

To be very honest, I don’t know ... I never asked him.

Now, let’s assume that you can name all of the ten commandments. Please tell me what commandments you have broken in your life time, and which ones you have kept.

Think about it ... we are enthralled by the sins of others, but loathe to admit to our own ... even to ourselves. Take a look at the national scandal rags in the supermarket checkout aisle. There

are filled with the sins of the rich and famous ... entertainers, politicians, movie stars, sports figures, and others. Who is having an affair with whom. Which sexual predator is it this time? Who has been arrested for DUI ... again? Who is spreading vicious rumors about another politician? Who is stealing from whom? The list goes on.

But in our own lives we usually hide our sins in the dark reaches of our psyche ... away from the light. We know the sins we have committed, the people we have hurt along the way, the lies we have told others ... and ourselves, the things we have stolen from others ... self-esteem, love, attention, independence. But we are loathing to admit it because it lessens who we are ... or at least we think it does.

I don't think that is what God wants for us. All too often the Ten Commandments are viewed as punitive legalisms ... like a 25 mph speed limit. That is not how I see them.

First, the introduction to the Ten Commandments, at least in the Exodus version, begins with a reminder of God's love.

*"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."*

This is shorthand for the whole Exodus saga. In other words God is saying, "Remember, I saw your suffering in Egypt and I love you so much that I called my servant Moses out of a burning bush, I sent him to challenge Pharaoh, divided the waters to allow you to escape. I led you by a cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night. I fed you bread from heaven when you were hungry, and I gave you water from a rock when you were thirsty. Remember that I love you ... and I want to point you to a path that will lead to wholeness in your life.

However, we all know we stumble in the dark. We sometimes take detours that lead us in the wrong direction. The Hebrew word that is translated "sin" is "armetia" ... it is the same word that is used when an archer shoots his arrow and misses the mark. Yes, we miss the mark at times ... but the path is still there for us to follow, and its reward is fullness of life.

And God doesn't want us to live under the burden of guilt. That is why the answer to Zachary's question is "Yes. God will forgive you even if you have broken nine out of the Ten Commandments. God will forgive you even if you have broken all ten!"

Now don't get me wrong. There are consequences for sin ... there is a cost. When we miss the mark someone gets hurt. Most of the time it is someone else, and restitution must be made. Sometimes it is ourselves that get hurt and we must also restore ourselves. This involves an honest acceptance of the pain we have caused, and not mere justification. And it means moving beyond beating oneself up on the side of the path, an earnest attempt to change one's own life, and then re-entering the path and continuing the journey.

But what about those Israelites and their anxiety? And what about our anxiety today? The Israelites in the wilderness convince Moses's brother Aaron to build a golden calf for them to

worship. In our anxiety, what is our golden calf? Rather than do the hard work of self-examination and living by life-giving directives we would rather turn it all over to some absentee authority ... let them decide for us. And when that doesn't work find another absentee authority and let them decide for us. If it is not a golden calf, then how about a silver ram? In our case today ... if not this syndicated columnist, what about another? If not this mega church evangelical preacher, what about the one from Tulsa? If not this superhero politician, then what about that one over there?

I began this sermon with the question about the God who was angry at the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf, and was ready to wipe them out. And, the king who punished his wedding guest ... who he forced to attend the wedding ... he punished the wedding guest for not being properly attired. I asked, "Does this sound like the God that you worship?" My answer is "No!" The God I worship wants the best for humanity ... and the best for each and every one of us. The God I worship leads me towards wholeness ... and knows I sometimes fall off the path ... and who invites me back on the journey. And the God that I worship forgives so that I might know what unconditional love truly means.

So, I leave you with an exercise to ponder: Go back and re-read the Ten Commandments ... the Decalogue ... the Ten Words as they are known in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Book of Common Prayer. As you re-read them, read beyond the literal meaning into the metaphorical. Open each up to include your life as you live it day-to-day. Then ask yourself. How might these describe a path to a life of wholeness in the image of God? Finally, ask yourself how many of those commandments you have broken ... in all the obvious and in all the subtle ways, and the commandments you continue to break on a regular basis ... and then know that you are already forgiven. God wants you back on the path to fullness of life ... the life God gave you. Remember, it is your life ... not some golden calf.

Amen.