

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Exodus 20:1-4; 7-9  
October 8, 2017

## Behind the Great Green Curtain

I wonder, what were you thinking as you heard and responded to the first reading from scripture? Were you surprised to encounter the Ten Commandments here, in this house of worship?

Probably not. If Alabama's newest senator had his way, you'd see the Ten Commandments in other places. You'd see them chiseled into granite monuments on courthouse lawns and posted on the wall above the judge's bench in every courtroom of the land.

There is room for debate as to whether it's a good – or a constitutional – idea to display the Ten Commandments on publicly-owned property, but I doubt that most people would object to finding them printed in their Sunday order of service.

If you had been a regular worshipper in this sanctuary in the late 1800's, you'd have been confronted with the Ten Commandments every Sunday. That's because they were painted on the west wall of the sanctuary, near the pulpit. In her wonderful history of the church, Barbara Rhodes reports that the Ten Commandments "had been emblazoned in large letters, beautifully lithographed and edged in gold."<sup>1</sup>

You might think that seeing the Ten Commandments painted on the wall would be a welcomed sight every Sunday, but you have to remember, we're talking about Presbyterians. Presbyterians can manage to fight about almost anything. In fact, the presence of the Decalogue was a matter of no little controversy.

One morning worshippers arrived to find that someone had stretched a large green curtain over those gold-edged words of the Law. Nobody owned up to putting up that curtain, and, being Presbyterians, nobody was impolite

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Rhodes, *At First; The Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, Florida 1828-1938*, Privately printed 1994, p. 92

enough to ask. So, the curtain remained until the year 1893, when the sanctuary was expanded to the west, and the original west wall was torn down.

Wall gone. Problem solved.

But the commandments themselves cannot – and should not – be forgotten. They express the fundamental and joyful obligations of the covenant community – the outline of how to live faithfully in relationship to God and neighbor.

How do the people of Israel, newly set free from bondage in Egypt, express their true freedom? How do God's people live out their covenant with God? They do it by worshipping God and God alone, by refusing to use God's name as a weapon, by slowing down and keeping sabbath.

They do it by honoring father and mother – by nurturing family life. They do it by being faithful to their marriage vows, by refusing to steal or murder, by keeping their promises, by resisting the culture of envy and covetousness that is constantly trying to squeeze them into its mold.

The Commandments remind us whose we are, and whom we serve. Perhaps, like our ancestors in the faith, we should consider nailing them to the front doors of our homes and wearing them in the middle of our foreheads.

John Calvin, the saint we preachers love to quote, but not always to heed, taught that there were three uses of the Law. The first was to convict us of our sin and our need for repentance.

Look at that list. Does it not expose ways in which we have fallen short of God's best hopes for us? Can anyone here claim, like that young man in Luke's Gospel, that he or she has kept the commandment without fail?

My grandparents attended a Presbyterian church in the little town of Coahoma, Texas. That church had a hard time securing experienced pastors, and tended to get the ones who arrived fresh out of seminary. Charlie was one of those. He tried to learn the lingo of the farming culture he found himself in, but he was not the most eloquent of public speakers.

Years ago, it was standard practice to hire teams of agricultural workers to chop the weeds that grew up in the cotton fields around Coahoma. The farmers called them “hoe hands” because that was what they used – a hoe with a large blade and a long wooden handle.

One morning during the pastoral prayer, Pastor Charlie prayed earnestly, “Lord’ bless the hoe-ers in the fields.” He then prayed, “Lord, please forgive us our falling shorts.”

After worship my grandmother had to pull Charlie aside, and say, “It’s “hoe-hands,” Charlie, not “ho-ers.” And we prefer “sins” to “falling shorts.”

Anyway, that was Calvin’s first use of the Law – to expose our sinfulness, our “falling shorts.”

The second use of the Law, according to Calvin, is to restrain evil. The law is a tool to curb wrong-doing and preserve civil order.

The third use of the Law, Calvin thought, is positive, not negative. The Law is the believer’s guide and light on the path of faithfulness. The Law shows us how to live in gratitude for the grace we have received in Jesus Christ. We follow the law not to escape punishment, but to please the God of grace.

Not a scold to remind us of our sinfulness. Not a club to keep us in order. But a guide – a teacher, a light in the darkness. The Law, said Calvin “urges us into well-doing.”

For that reason, Calvin placed the reading or recitation of the Law not *before* the confession of sin, but *after* it – after the assurance of God’s forgiveness. Calvin didn’t buy the idea that the scriptures revealed *either* law or gospel. For him, the Law is gospel because it shows us how to live in gratitude for grace.

Not law and gospel opposed to one another, but grace and gratitude wed to one another – that’s where the Law fits in, according to Calvin.

You can’t really blame those Presbyterians who lived in the 1890’s for looking askance as those Ten Commandments staring them in the face every time they walked through the church door. For that reason, the great green curtain might have been a good idea.

How much better it would have been, if, after the confession and pardon, someone had pulled a cord, and opened the curtain. That could have been a dramatic liturgical expression of Calvin's third use of the Law.

In a moment, we are going to ordain and install elders. Elders are a big part of Calvin's plan for the reformation of the Church. The way he read the Bible, the church has had elders from the very start. Their job is to lead the people in the direction God desires.

In our tradition, there are two kinds of elders – ruling elders and teaching elders.

I'm a teaching elder, also known as a minister of word and sacrament. The only difference between me and a ruling elder is our job descriptions. Teaching elders and ruling elders hold the same rank. On the session, each gets one vote – that's all – just one. Calvin knew better than to give preachers more power than ruling elders.

We call them "ruling elders" not because it their job is to lord it over everyone else, but because it's their job to lead and to measure out the people's progress toward God's kingdom. The "rule" in that old-fashioned title means "measuring tool." Think "yardstick."

We elect elders not to carry out the will of the congregation, but to seek God's will for the congregation. Sometimes those two agendas match. Sometimes they don't. That's the wonder and the challenge of being Presbyterian.

As we pray for these new elders, let us ask God to open the great green curtain and continue to guide us in the way of grace and gratitude. Let the Law and the cross guide us on our way.