

Sermon for October 4th, 2020

World Communion Sunday (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, and 12-20 and Matthew 21: 33-46

Sermon Title: *We Are What We Remember*

Prayer of Invocation

Holy Giver of all life, you work in us and around us and through us when we believe that you are working in our lives; when we surrender our will to yours, we become your agents of peace and love and compassion in the world. You travelled among the Israelites on their way from slavery to freedom and gave them water from the rock when they were thirsty. You walked among the people in Jerusalem, healed the sick, cast out demons, and taught through stories and parables. Bless us with your commandments and teach us the ways of life and death. Unite us with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world that we might bless this hurting world in the name of Jesus, who teaches us what it means to do your will. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination

Holy Spirit, come. Search us deeply, open our hearts to what you have to say to us today, cleanse us from all dubious devotions. Give us the gift of remembering who you are, to whom we belong. Amen.

The Ten Commandments are given to the people of Israel *after* they have been delivered from the land of Egypt. When the people began the journey from Egypt and slavery to a new life and a promised land, God told Moses *I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.* They have been blessed, and the only reason to follow the law is because they are grateful. This is an important point for us to remember as well. We don't follow God's rules *in order to be blessed* but because we are grateful to God for delivering us from sin and death.

There are actually two versions of the Ten Commandments, one version in chapter 20 of Exodus, our lectionary reading for today, the second version in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy. The two versions are very similar. For example, the first three commandments in both versions relate to our relationship with God, the last six to our relationship with neighbor. However, there are subtle differences. In the Deuteronomy version, the "neighbor's wife" gets a verse all to herself, whereas in Exodus she is lumped with the neighbor's house, slave, ox, and donkey. The difference probably reflects the changing status of women in society in that women were no longer regarded only as property, like the donkey.

However, most of us are very familiar with the pounding grammar of both versions of the Ten Commandments.....**You shall not.....You shall not.....You shall not.....**In other words, don't do those things that will get you into trouble with God or your neighbor. In both versions, the pounding grammar of **You shall not.....**is interrupted by a command that I think carries a different tone: **to remember.** What is it that we are to remember?

Exodus tells us: *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But 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. For 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.* The Deuteronomy version adds this fascinating detail to the fourth commandment: *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

We need to remember and integrate this version into our own narrative as did a little boy on the first day of school. The teacher asked each student where she or he was from. The little boy said that he and his family were from Egypt. *Really*, said the teacher. *Yes*, he replied. *My family were once slaves there until the Lord brought us out.* We are all grafted onto a larger narrative.

In one of the most famous poems by T.S. Eliot, his character J. Alfred Prufrock measures out his life with coffee spoons. That is a dismal image of a life; the fourth invites us to measure out our lives in Sabbaths, by remembering who we are and what has been done for us.

Several of the writers we have been reading in our book group Wednesday evenings also connect memory and God. Frederick Buechner writes: *We cannot undo our old mistakes or their consequences any more than we can erase old wounds we have both suffered and inflicted, but through the power that memory give us of thinking, feeling, imagining our way back through time, we can at long last finally finish with the past in the sense of removing its power to hurt us and other people and to stunt our growth as human beings.*

Each time we come to the table we are invited to remember. Each Sabbath we are invited to remember who we are and to whom we belong. The commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy is God's way of helping us not to get lost in the wilderness. Because what happens in the wilderness is that the heart becomes bitter. We are no different from those early Israelites. On the way to the land of milk and honey, there's lots of opportunity to become overwhelmed with the difficulties and setbacks of the journey. It is in the act of remembering that we find our true north once again. The most dangerous sin for us is forgetfulness.

The earliest record of a communion service comes from the third century from the church in Rome. Communion began in much the same way that we begin it today. *The Lord be with you....and also with you.* The early prayers were similar to the ones we say today, the bread was broken as we break it today, and the cup was shared.

There was one difference, though. On the table was also a bowl full of milk and honey. The people ate the bread, drank from the cup, and then they had a sip of milk and honey. They

were being given a foretaste of the place to which they were journeying. At this table, we, too, are given a foretaste of the place to which we are journeying. The Bishop of Rome who recorded the details of the early communion service also wrote these words: *With the sweet gift of milk and honey we are nourished like little children, by the sweetness of Christ's Word, softening the bitter heart.*

For as long as God's people can remember, they have been seeking the way home. In Deuteronomy, the story of Israel begins: *A wandering Aramean was my father....* That is the story that every Hebrew learned to repeat when presenting first fruits to God. However prosperous they became, they were never to forget that they had been delivered. Just as the little boy did when he told his teacher that his family had once lived in Egypt. We are to remember that our destination has never been Egypt or Jerusalem or Babylon. Our final destination is not Keswick or Paris or Parry Sound. We are travelers and we need to remember to travel lightly. We are all blessed and we are called to bless one another as we travel toward our final destination. *Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.* AMEN.