**“R-E-S-P-E-C-T”**

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 First Presbyterian Church**

**November 1, 2020**

A woman stormed into the store and demanded to talk to the owner. She had purchased a Noah’s Ark, hand-carved by an Amish craftsman. When she got it home, she discovered that “Noah” was missing. He wasn’t in the ark or anywhere in the set. The store owner tried to overcome her anger with a little humor, saying “Maybe he was washed overboard; Could he be lost at sea?” Finally he explained to her that the Amish strictly adhere to the biblical commandment against graven images or idols. The Amish carver didn’t make a “Noah” because that would have been making a graven image. In the end, the customer wasn’t buying it, literally. She returned the Amish set and bought a Mennonite Noah’s Ark, since Mennonite craftsmen don’t follow the commandment quite so strictly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So you see, the Ten Commandments are not as “cut and dry” as you might think. There’s room for interpretation. And if there’s room for interpretation, how important to our lives are they, really? I mean, yes, no other gods, don’t murder, don’t sleep around, don’t steal – those are pretty straight forward.

But what about using the Lord’s name in vain, keeping the Sabbath, not lying, and not coveting or longing for what your neighbor has? Sadly, we all break at least one of those commandments. None of us is perfect.

As I contemplated the importance of the Ten Commandments, one word came to mind that seemed to sum up all 10 commandments: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. That’s right, respect. Just a little respect, as Aretha Franklin put it. That’s all God wants from us: respect, respect for God, respect for yourself, and respect for others.

In our calling to respect God, we are commanded to not have any other gods, not make any of our stuff out to be an idol or object of worship, and not call on the name of God – the power of God – for unholy purposes.

In our calling to respect ourselves, we are to keep the Sabbath holy. In other words, we are to be thoughtful about how we use our time and energy, setting aside some of it just for God and us, to be together with God. And in our calling to respect others, we are to not murder – but to respect life – not sleep around but rather respect our sexuality, not steal – but respect the property of others, not lie – respect the truth – and not covet, which is another way of saying respect your own heart, don’t set your heart on getting what others have out of jealously or greed.

This is important stuff, people. So important that, when it came to us from God, Exodus tells us the Israelites witnessed “thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking.” Moses comes down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, and “they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance. Moses 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.”

What?!? Don’t be afraid; “God just wants to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” That makes me a little afraid. It makes me afraid for two very important reasons.

First, because it says I should have the “fear of God” in me, and second, because I do sin, we all do, even preachers, sadly, are subject to sin.

Take for example the preacher who was walking down the street when he came upon a group of boys, all about 10 or 12 years old. The boys were surrounding a dog. Concerned, he went over and asked, “What are you doing with that dog?” One of the boys said, “This dog is a neighborhood stray. Since we all want him for our own, we decided that whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie will get to keep the dog.” Of course, the preacher wasn’t happy about that, saying “You boys shouldn’t be having a contest telling lies!” He then launched into a 10-minute sermon against lying that began with, “Don’t you boys know it’s a sin to lie,” and ended with, “Why, when I was your age, I never told a lie.” There was dead silence for about a minute. Just as the preacher was beginning to think he’d gotten through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep sigh and said, “All right, give him the dog.” … Never told a lie….

No one is without sin. In fact, people sin all the time, and they seem to get away with, “fear of God” or no “fear of God,” which brings us back to respect. When the Bible says to “fear God,” what it really means is to respect God. That’s all the Ten Commandments are asking us to do – to respect God, respect yourself, and respect others. And we’re given the top 10 ways we do that: No other gods, no idols, no wrongful use of God’s name, keep the Sabbath day, honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, and do not covet.

Any and all sins of yours or anyone else lead back to these 10 commandments. And each and everyone one of them has to do with maintaining respect for God, for yourself and for others. It’s that simple; and it’s that hard.

When the Israelites heard about this, they were so afraid that they told Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Now as it turns out, we have trouble listening to Moses, God, Jesus – you name it – parents, mentors, teachers, ministers, doctors, therapists, friends – you name it.

We have trouble listening and respecting.

The Lord speaks to us in countless ways all the time – even in this moment right here – telling us, telling you what you should do in the face of it comes to your latest sinful, misguided action or choice. If you listen to what the Lord is saying right now in your heart, and respect it, act on it, you are blessed. And if you don’t – if we don’t listen to the Lord when it comes to our sinful, misguided ways – we are forgiven. Even as we suffer the negative consequences, we are still forgiven.

The bottom line is if hearing and knowing were enough for us, we would not sin; the Israelites would not have sinned. But they did sin; we do sin. So God followed up the Ten Commandments with a personal visit, coming to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

In Jesus, God conquers all sin, and boy do we need Jesus. Everyday we prove ourselves unable and/or unwilling to respect the Law of God, and so we need to have faith in Jesus, we need to have the grace and mercy of the Lord.

No matter what consequences we are facing for our misguided ways, when we put our trust Jesus, God will see us through. We can count on God’s blessing when we focus each day on doing all that we can to respect God, respect ourselves and respect others. And when we focus each night on the friend and savior we have in Jesus, we can count on God’s forgiveness and our salvation. That’s all it takes-being respectful during the day and turing it all over to Jesus at night. Amen.

**Pastoral Prayer**

Give hope to us, O Lord, that these days are not unknown to you.  As we anticipate election day, let us join in proclaiming that you are not a God of darkness and chaos.

Give us mercy, O Lord, to lose with dignity and win with compassion.

Unite us in the holy desire to carry out your work regardless of the election outcome.

Let us rise each day with an urgency to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the traveler, comfort the sick, and set the captive free.

Lord, we pray for all those gathered in voting booths, in precincts, in campaign rallies, and those huddled around computer screens.   Remind us of the promise of your salvation as you bestow upon this land your protection and your guidance.

We pray, also, for those struggling with illness and grief, financial troubles and family issues, stress and emotional upheaval.  Send to them your Spirit of healing and comfort, protection and guidance, peace and wellbeing.

We life all this up to you in the name of Jesus, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,**

**as we forgive our debtors;**

**and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  Amen.**

1. Based on "The Case of the Missing Noah," Penn Dutch Traveler, January/February 1996, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)