

“Loyalty to God”

When I was growing up, I generally behaved. Like any normal kid, though, I occasionally go into trouble, usually at school. I had my worst times in middle school. I got sent to the office a few times and had to sit in detention a few times. A couple of times they brought out the dreaded paddle. But nothing ever filled me with more dread than “Wait until your father gets home.” My father only spanked me about twice in my life but the fear of disappointing him is what drove me to behave. I also knew my father loved me very much and would do anything for me. I wanted to do anything for him as well.

As discussed by the Rev. Kathryn Johnston, senior pastor at Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, sometimes the dread of a father with a lot of rules is why some Christians don’t like to spend a lot of time in the Old Testament because the Ten Commandments can seem downright oppressive. But time spent in the Old Testament reveals the God of grace and love also found in the New Testament. The commandments are law; they are laws of love that help us to be in community.

In order to be community, we need rules. Without rules there is chaos and people get hurt. It’s true that people have a hard time keeping the rules. This is why Jesus summarizes them by citing the Old Testament commandment, *Love God*

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with all your heart, mind, and strength. How? Today we will focus on the first three commandments in Exodus 20, 1-7, our relationship with God, by loving God above all Gods, by not worshipping idols, and by not taking the Lord's name in vain.

To capture the force and meaning of the Ten Commandments, they must be read in the context of God's covenant with Israel. They are instruction for shaping God's people so that they may be a witness to the world about the God who delivered them from bondage. The initial commandments are about loyalty and allegiance; that God alone is Israel's only God; no other. This claim is rooted in the Lord's mighty acts of deliverance and faithfulness in his promises to Israel's ancestors. The event of the Exodus itself provides the authority for the commands as well as the material claim of the commands.

In Exodus 20:3 we read "You shall have no other Gods before me." Four themes emerge from this commandment. First, it requires Israel to mobilize all of its life, in every sphere, around one single loyalty. In the contemporary world, what does this mean to us? As in the ancient world, we like to practice henotheism, which lets different Gods have their play in different spheres of our life. We may worship Yahweh on Sunday, but we might worship the God of materialism the rest of the week, essentially ignoring the God of salvation. But this commandment tells

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us we are to have loyalty to God in all aspects of our life, in our work, our play, all that we do. This command insists on the integrity, coherence, and unity of all life.

The second theme is that we must realize that this commandment makes no claim that monotheism is the reality. It does not mean that there are no other Gods. In fact, it presumes that there are other Gods. It insists that other Gods must receive none of Israel's loyalty or allegiance. In our world today, Gods of materialism, self-promotion shall not receive our loyalties.

The third theme is to understand "before me." This part of the command pertains precisely to the practice of worship and asserts that the liturgic life of Israel must be under stringent discipline in order to avoid compromise.

The fourth theme is that instead of reading "Thou shalt not" it should be "there will not be to you." Yahweh, in light of the Exodus, declares the banishment of all other Gods. This statement is a deduction of the theological emancipation, whereby Israel can gladly serve Yahweh without any distracting compromise. One does not need to obey the command but only to hear and trust the good news of triumph and banishment.

In Exodus 20:4, we read "Do not make an idol for yourself." The second command, often linked to the first, asserts Yahweh's distinctiveness. It contains three prohibitions. You shall not make, you shall not serve, you shall not bow

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down. What this commandment means is that no theological significance can be given to something we create. We can only be intimate with Yahweh. We cannot create any image, even a visible representation of Yahweh. We are prohibited from turning Yahweh into a visible, controlled object. So, we really should not have those pictures of Yahweh as a kindly old man with a beard. The reason we are not to create these images of our God is that they are a distortion of Yahweh's free character by an attempt to locate Yahweh and diminish something of Yahweh's freedom.

The third command is to not use the Lord your God's name as if it were of no significance. This is often misunderstood to refer to only bad or vulgar language. This is an issue but more is at stake. The name of God bespeaks God's powerful presence and purpose. To make wrongful use of the name in the mobilization of Yahweh's presence in the service of some purpose that is extraneous to Yahweh's own person is the problem. Such a practice may be done in quite pious ways with an instrumental view of God.

We must be careful about letting groups, governments use the name of Yahweh for their own purposes. How many times have we heard the statement, "God is on our side?" Is this really true? One of the most beautiful prayers to God I have ever read was written by a German soldier in the trenches of the Battle of

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Stalingrad during World War II. He was convinced that God was on the side of the German army and that victory would be won with God's help. Of course, the Germans ultimately lost that battle and the war. God usually does not take sides in war, but most, if not all, agree that the Germany of World War II was not doing God's work. Yet, the German government had convinced its people and its army, taking God's name in vain, that God was guiding them. Before we judge them too harshly, have we been misled by those claiming that God is on their side? Let us always remember that the third commandment asserts that God cannot be put to our use and is never a means towards an end.

The third commandment goes along with the first two commands. All three involve seductive ways in which the God of the Exodus is diminished or trivialized.

These commandments have as their topic the voicing of the holy, jealous God of the Bible who commands and saves, a God who is an active, decisive presence in our common public life, but who in holiness is beyond all our most pious efforts at control and manipulation. Yahweh has driven away all rivals, has displaced all other loyalties and demands full devotion from Israel.

What does this mean for us today? Do we have a concrete community that can embrace and practice this demanding loyalty? Most of the people with whom

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we preach and teach are both yearning and reluctant, ready and hesitant to embrace these commandments that bespeak a lifetime of ceding over authority?

Can we truly give over all authority to Yahweh? We have always lived in a world of options and Gods who make competing appeals to our allegiance. In pursuit of joy, we may choose Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and fertility and pleasure; in pursuit of security, we may choose Mars, the Roman god of war (or in modern day terms we may choose those who promise law and order); in pursuit of genuine love, we may choose Eros (or a modern -day love connection on the internet). It is clear that these choices are not Yahweh, that they are not gods who have ever wrought an Exodus or offered a covenant. They are not the Gods who should demand our loyalty.

In the Christian tradition, baptism is the dramatic form of making a God choice, in which receiving a new name and making promises is choosing this liberating covenantal faith against any other shape of life. Thus, in the Christian tradition, appropriating and living our baptism means living among a mass of options.

Today, among a pandemic which has changed much in our lives, we are given many options to solve our problems. Politicians and others with something to gain are dangling all kind of things out there for us in these days of uncertainty.

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Yet, the most important things have not changed. Stick with the top ten commandments and go from there.

We worship together as communities of faith not because we are perfect at the rules but because we hold onto the faithful knowledge that God's grace and love are what unite us, not the rules. We are going to disagree. We are going to disappoint. We are going to break the rules.

And so, we hold one another up, we unite in our love for God and in God's returned love for us, and we remain community, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Love God-no other gods, no idols. Don't take the Lord's name in vain. It's that simple