

**Seventeenth after Pentecost - World Wide Communion Sunday**

October 5, 2014

Barrhaven United Church

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-10  
[Matthew 21: 33-46]  
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**Words that Bring Life**

I purchased a book of meditations and readings of the Iona Community called *Gathered and Scattered*. It's lovely. A collection of daily prayers and meditations. At the end of the book I found a small entry called "The Rule of the Iona Community." It goes like this.

The fivefold rule calls members to;

1. Daily prayer and Bible reading
2. Sharing and accounting for the use of our money
3. Planning and accounting for the use of our time
4. Action for justice and peace in society
5. Meeting with and accounting to each other

Everyone knows that Iona means a place of deep spirituality. It has been a destiny for spiritual pilgrimage for centuries. Its roots are deep; rooted in its Rules of accountability and mutuality. It's the way the members live together in community with minimum fuss and discord. It helps them be on the same page. It gives them a clear identity and purpose.

That's what the ten commandments are. The rule of the community. This Rule of Moses, the Rule of the Moses' community, tells them how to live together. More importantly, it shapes their identity. It tells them who they are and to whom they belong. They are Yahweh's people. And it shapes their mission and purpose in the world. The 10 commandments are our inheritance. What does the Rule of Moses say to us today?

The commandments are, first of all, not commands at all. They are words. The title in early Greek editions of the Bible calls them that - the Decalogue - deca meaning 10, and logue meaning word. The commandments are better understood as the words of a covenant.

A covenant is a contract relationship between two parties, where, for the purposes of the relationship both parties are presumed to be equal, even if in real life they are not. Covenant takes its form from the contracts made in the ancient world between emperors and their land-owning lords. These two groups were not equals by any means, but for the purpose of the covenant they were presumed to be. So the king promised to protect his subjects and the land from its enemies and the lords promised to supply the troops for him to do it. A tidy arrangement.

The Decalogue that we have in Exodus records the promises made between God and the people of Israel that created the first recorded covenant between a deity and a nation. The decalogue spells out the obligations of the people that will make them God's own chosen people, and in turn

God promises to be their God. The Ten Commandments, the ten words defined the Israelites as God's people.

The ten words form the social and religious basis of community. They are the minimum standard for behaviour. "The floor below which we must not fall." They aren't laws in the legal sense. They aren't rules and regulations set out and enforced by a tyrant. They're guidelines for living, a code of behaviour that embodies the community's collective experience and wisdom of what is required to live well together in peace and harmony. And they are that for us just as they were for the ancient Israelites.

Three are particularly interesting. You shall not covet is related to you shall not steal. It recognizes that if you covet what others have, you have already committed theft in your heart. Coveting is soul destroying as well as community destroying.

Honour your father and your mother is interesting because women are included. Honour was about men. Men received honour and were treated honourably. But here, honour is extended to women. Mothers are to be honoured by their male children - just as fathers were. Unheard of in the ancient world.

Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy is related to the injunction about not making idols. Not making idols recognizes that God can't be depicted or confined by an object. It's about the proper use and understanding of space when it comes to worshipping God. It tells us God can be found every where in the world. Not working on the Sabbath embodies an astonishing insight: God makes a claim on time as well as space. I think this is a new religious insight. God claims space-time and we continue to recognize that claim by being present, here at worship on Sunday.

Many thoughtful people, Christian and Jewish theologians among them, have recognized that if we could just follow the ten words as a world community, the world would be a better place. For example, think of bearing false witness in terms of the claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction; a claim which provided the reason for the Iraq war. Or think of not coveting anything that belongs to our neighbours. In our world our neighbours are the whole world. So that requirement goes far beyond the scope it had for the Israelites. It means for us not coveting and exploiting the resources of the developing world for our own ends without regard for their needs and desires. It means not coveting and exploiting human beings and their labour for our own comfort.

Ten words that form us, that call us to be more like Christ, that form our life together, that help us bring the realm of God into our world. The Rule of Moses, like the rule of Iona, shape our community and our spiritual life together. Truly, ten words that bring life. Amen.