

First Comes Love

Preached FCCW 10-4-2020

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-18

When a couple comes to me to be married part of the time we spend together involves me getting to know them and engaging in some pre-marital counseling to prepare them to enter the covenant of marriage well equipped for success. But a large part of the time is also dedicated to planning the wedding ceremony itself. I go over each part of the ceremony carefully with them so that they understand the meaning and significance of what will take place in the ceremony. The objective is for the ceremony to reflect their unique love for each other, and God's wondrous love for them.

One of the most personal parts of the wedding ceremony are the vows they will make to each other. The wedding vows are the words that articulate the commitments the couple are making to each other. The vows are a way of saying, "Because I love you, I will show my love for you in these ways." The vows can never encompass the totality of their mutual commitment, but they give the basic framework for how that commitment that will keep them together, will reflect the love that has brought them together. As the old nursery rhyme goes, "First comes love, then comes marriage." The love that comes first shapes and colors the marriage relationship.

Now, imagine a couple where the vows dictated the state of the marriage, instead. Picture a couple who greet each other at the end of the day by going down a checklist of their obligations to each other. One might say something like, "today I wasn't unfaithful to you (forsaking all others), I brought home a paycheck (in plenty and in want), and I didn't file for divorce because you had the flu (in sickness and in health), so my obligations to you are complete." That would be a pretty cold, mechanical relationship, wouldn't it? I think we can agree that it isn't the life we have in mind when we walk down the aisle.

Yet, that's exactly what some people's relationship to God looks like. They live as though God was following them with a big clip-board and a checklist of rules. As long as they don't break the rules things are good between them and God. The sad thing about that is that these people go through life *avoiding God's disapproval*, when they could be *experiencing God's love*. And the grand-daddy of checklists by which they imagine God is measuring them is the Ten Commandments. But the truth is, the Ten Commandments were never given as a test we have to pass to get God's stamp of approval.

The Ten Commandments are a lot like wedding vows, actually. They are a way of illustrating what life lived in covenant relationship with God will look like. They are not a set of demands we must meet before God will accept us. They are the sign that God has already accepted us. *First* comes love, God's love for us; *then* comes the covenant relationship with God that is expressed in the Commandments.

It's written right there in the prelude to God's giving of the Commandments. The passage starts off saying, "Then God spoke all these words." The very first of those words spoken on Mt. Sinai are these. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Before God utters a single Commandment, he is declaring his relationship with the people. "I am the Lord your God." God has already given Godself to be their God before they had been asked to obey a single Commandment to earn it.

The next thing God does is remind them of how He has demonstrated His love for them. He freed them from Egypt, where they had been slaves. God does not promise a relationship if the people obeyed; first God delivered Israel, then God asked for their faithful response to what had been done for them.

Israel's obedience to the commandments is always a response to God's grace. It is never a means to salvation in and of itself. *First* comes the pronouncement of God's love for Israel, *then* comes the Commandments. God didn't intend for the Commandments to be obeyed out of fear of punishment. God trusts that the people will return the love God has for them and so will want to follow the Commandments because it is their heart's desire to live in accordance with God's will.

It's the same as with couples. Spouses don't want each other to be kind and loving because they are being held to promises they made on their wedding day. They want to know that what their partner does for them comes from the heart, not a contract. The Ten Commandments are all about relationship. Our relationship to God and our relationships with each other. The two are inseparable, really. A learned man once asked Jesus which was the most important commandment. Jesus gave two answers to the question. Love God with all you've got and love your neighbor as yourself. That sums up the Ten Commandments. The first four Commandments have to do with how we love God. The last six are about how we are to love each other.

God liberated the Israelites from slavery, and gave them the Commandments to live by so that they would reflect God's nature in their lives and in their society. Christians believe that God in Christ has liberated us from slavery to sin and death. That liberation came as a gift of grace, without preconditions. If our response to the gift was to easily and automatically live by reflecting that grace to others, we would not need rules and Commandments to show us the way. But the fact is, reflecting God's grace does not come easily or automatically to any of us. And so, we have the Commandments. Not as a burden to bear, but as a gift to share.

Something you hear people say a lot is that they are spiritual but not religious. That means a lot of different things to different people, I'm sure. But at least one thing that it means is that people associate religion with rules. They're looking for a relationship with God is more than obedience to laws. But a truly loving relationship never leaves us the same as we were before. Love motivates us to want to give of ourselves in return, to be obedient to a higher calling than what we would know apart from that relationship.

It is important that we keep the Ten Commandments because the better we live by them the more our lives, and this world, will reflect God's vision of a world where God's will prevails. But what is just as important as keeping the Commandments, is keeping straight our motive for obeying them. Instead of looking at the Ten Commandments and asking ourselves how well we have obeyed them, we would do better to look at them and ask ourselves how well they describe our lives as a response to God's grace. Obeying the commandments is not how we earn God's love, it is how we live because we have received God's love without earning it. Obedience doesn't get us what God promises. Obedience is the evidence that we believe that we've already been given what God has promised. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an important way to be renewed in our awareness that first came God's love for us, fully and for all time declared in Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. Then comes the Covenant by which we seek to conform to the love that Jesus has demonstrated to us.