

Charter for a Holy Nation

Exodus 19:1-9, Exodus 23:1-9, Luke 10:25-28 by Patty Friesen (May 14/17)

After vandals damaged nearly 200 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery near St. Louis in February, it wasn't only Jews who rose up to denounce the act of hate. Muslim groups helped raise more than \$120,000 to repair the damage and offered a reward to catch those responsible. Some 2,000 people—Jews, Christians and Muslims—helped clean up the mess. And then they held a multi-faith prayer vigil. What's most remarkable is that local Jewish groups said the response, while extraordinary, was not surprising. People of different faiths around St. Louis have often lent support to each other during a crisis. Rather than define themselves solely by their religion, they recognize the bonds of love that mark the basis for the three Abrahamic faiths.

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Britain said at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington: "Today the world is awash with hate more so than any time in my lifetime. And if religion is part of the problem, let religion be part of the solution." He continued: "We are enlarged by our differences and my prayer is that we will learn a new friendship, a new listening to one another as Jews, Christians and Muslims throughout the world. The first chapter of the Bible says that God made humans in God's likeness. If people of faith believe that, then our greatest religious challenge is how can I see God's image in someone who is not in my image? Whose colour, culture or class is not mine?"

Our scripture today describes a charter of how any group of people must behave in order to serve a holy God. Israel must carefully prepare to meet God on the holy mountain where they will receive not only the 10 commandments but all the Laws of God

that will make them into a holy nation. There is a great deal of movement up and down the mountain. While Moses goes up in verse 3 and comes down in verse 14, God also descends the mountain in verses 18 and 20. The elders and priests have their roles but the people are given direct access to God and there seems to be a broadly based level of power. More important is the affirmation that the mountain is the place where earth touches heaven, where the human realm makes contact with the house of God and therefore the places is laden with holy presence.

Verse 4 recounts their history of liberation from Egypt. God identifies as an eagle. According to Deuteronomy 32:11-14, the eagle is a nurturing, protective parent who carries, guides and feeds. The eagle is also majestic and powerful. God is both powerful and tender, majestic and nurturing. The exodus required both power to save and nurturing to sustain in the wilderness. Later on in Isaiah 40, Israel itself becomes like an eagle that does not grow weary or faint. That eagle, however derives its strength from attentiveness to God, the one who creates and authorizes soaring eagles. (Job. 39:27)

On the basis of this relationship with an eagle-like God, Israel commits to being faithful as in a marriage or baptism ceremony. It's a commitment based in love and trust not in obedience and threats. Let's look at the 10 commandments #807 HWB. Some of us may even have them memorized. I'm going to walk through their outline. God begins again with reminding them of their deliverance from Egypt and God's desire for loyalty and respect. You shall have no other gods before me and you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain and you shall rest and take care of yourselves and observe the Sabbath as a way of also showing honour to God. So the first 4 commands are about our relationship to God and to ourselves.

By the time the children of Israel get to the border of the Promised Land after 40 years, Moses' refines these first four commandments into one basic, easily remembered one in Deuteronomy 6:4. Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Moses is giving this command to love God now because if we don't learn to love God, we'll never make it in the Promised Land. If we don't love God, we won't have the stamina for all those other 613 commandments relating to the people around us.

Love is a survival skill which we have to use and hone every single day, in good times and in bad. Loving God is a matter of daily practice, a habit that is sustained by will more than by any warm feelings we may have towards God on any given day. It is a habit of the heart, a habit that comes from a genuine internal intention and discipline that leads to life – not from obligation which leads to resentment. Love of God begins with knowing who God really is. Notice that Moses' commandments do not start with us. They start with God, Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One. That declaration of the Oneness of God is the basis of faith for any of the three Abrahamic faiths. Oneness denotes the utter incomparability and sufficiency of our God, who is sufficient to meet all our real needs. Therefore the Oneness of God puts a healthy pressure on it to identify what are our real needs, as well as to name the real needs in the world. This declaration that God is One puts pressure on us to be single-minded and wholehearted toward God. That's why Jews have for centuries observed the practice of daily reciting this declaration of God's Oneness, especially reciting it near the time of death. The One God who we loved in life will be the One who receives us in death.

The fifth commandment has to do with relationship to other people, beginning with our parents. Our first relationship with anyone is with our parents. It is a relationship that is with us for the entirety of our lives and for some of us, this may be a challenging relationship. Comedian Garrison Keillor says, God didn't tell us we had to love our parents, just to honour and respect them. At the very least, we have to make peace with our parents in order to have any success in our other intimate relationships.

Then we get into the other relational commandments, the heavies – you shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery and you shall not steal. Not a big challenge for most of us. But equal to those heavies are bearing false witness, gossiping or lying about a neighbor and finally, it seems mundane to covet, but in the interest of economic justice, we are not to covet or want everything our neighbor has.

Most of our modern legal code is based on the 10 Commandments with heavier penalties of course for murder and theft than taking the Lord's name in vain or coveting but in God's eyes, it's all the same kind of greedy, fearful motivation that's at the root of all evil. These last 5 commandments turn into 613 other commandments related to how we treat other people listed throughout the remaining books of Moses, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They are not romantic do-good commands but practical acts by neighbours that enhance the life of all. They are a code that again based on the 10 commandments relate firstly to God and then secondly to others. A code that Jesus reiterates in the Great Command, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

This command of Jesus is illustrated in the immigrant, Chuong Nyugen, who came to the US as a boat person refugee escaping Vietnam in 1975. Later he became a

US citizen and a Catholic priest. He made news this spring when he wrote Donald Trump on the day the president signed his executive order banning entrance to the US for Syrian and other refugees. He wrote: "I am a refugee. Becoming a refugee is a choice one makes when there are no other options." In his letter, Nyugen offered to relinquish his US citizenship so that the president could offer it to a Syrian refugee.

In traditional understandings of mercy, one gives up something for the sake of another's wellbeing. This is the basis of all commandments. It's a morality based in selfless love. In the words of Jesus: This is my body given for you – a gift of unbounded love. Nyugen also told the president he is requesting a job transfer to one of the seven predominantly Muslim countries named in the executive order. He wants to give back to refugees because he has been given so much from God in the first place. That's the spirit of the Ten commandments. Let us pray...

Loving God, thank you for loving us first, that we may know what it is to love you and also love others. Thank you for your guidance in these commands for joyful, peaceful, abundant living. Help us to do this work of love and faithful living every day. Amen.