

Commandment and Covenant

Terri Churchill
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Our Scripture focus from the lectionary today is an account of the Mosaic covenant and the giving of the Ten Commandments. Covenants are ancient agreements between two parties that made explicit the promises they were making to one another in order to live together well. In the Mosaic covenant, God asked the Israelites to remember the ways God had cared for them in freeing them from slavery. God reminded them that they were God's treasured people and God promised to be with them in special ways.

But this covenant also required something of Israel. In this passage we read about the Ten Commandments which were the basis of the entire Old Testament law. God promised to care for Israel, but Israel would have to live in a certain way to fulfill their part of the covenant.

Something that's important to keep in mind is that the Israelites were coming out of a long time of slavery. All of the people Moses had led out of Egypt were born into slavery. They had no memory of freedom. It was a part of their identity. And slaves are very, very clear about the rules because their lives depend on it.

That means that the Israelites were real clear about the rules for living in Egypt. But they weren't living in Egypt anymore. Now they were free, and they had no idea what that would mean for them. What did it mean to live as free people, no longer bound by the rules of Egypt? I'll bet they felt a lot of anxiety about that. For people who had lived as slaves, I can imagine that it would have been pretty uncomfortable to feel that they didn't know what this new life would look like.

We often experience rules as a kind of curse or burden. But none of us would want to live in a world where there are no agreements to help you to get along. And when I look at the content of the Ten Commandments that's exactly how they strike me. The Ten Commandments can be boiled down in this way:

The first three commandments were about God. Don't put any Gods above God. Don't make your own gods. And be careful how you use God's name. (That last one feels particularly important today because I see God's name invoked for many things that are not about God at all.) The rest of the commandments had to do with the way God was inviting them to live together: take time to rest. (This was a radical idea for former slaves!) Honor your parents. Don't kill or cheat or steal or lie. And don't envy anything that belongs to your neighbor. These all seem like wise guidelines for the Israelites as they wrestled with a new way to live.

But from there things kind of spiraled out of control. If you read the entire Old Testament Law you might come away with a picture of God as a mean-spirited, cruel, even sadistic being who is very, VERY concerned with rules. I wonder how much of the law was more about us and our needs for rules and rituals, our failure to understand love, than it was about God. The law became the Israelites' new slave master. The whole thing was doomed from the start. If the story ended there, we'd all be in a lot of trouble. Most of the Old Testament can be summed up like this:

- God invites the Israelites into a covenant with promises from God and a set of expectations of how the people would live together
- The people are unfaithful and descend into sin and idolatry (they fail God and fail one another and break their promises)
- The people suffer as a result of broken covenant
- God takes them back and renews his promises
- The cycle begins again

When Jesus comes on the scene, this history has played out over and over again. But Jesus ushers in something new. Jesus ushers in a new covenant based on his love for us, and it will cost him everything.

At one point in his ministry, someone comes to him to ask about the law. The exchange goes like this:

Matthew 22:36-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus summed up the whole law in this way: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. No one who was listening to him that day really understood what this meant. The church would not grasp how radical this new covenant was for quite some time. I doubt we grasp it even now. Paul later talked about this in his letter to the Galatian church.

Galatians 3:23-28

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is

no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The old law with its tedious and frightening conditions was gone. That slave master was dead. The law was meant to drive us to Jesus. It never could do what we hoped it could do. We could never follow the rules for very long without falling into selfishness and sin. So this is all very good news.

But this doesn't really let us off the hook, because love is hard and it requires something of us. This new covenant means that we will have to give of ourselves and pattern our lives after Jesus. This covenant is not characterized by a long list of rules and punishments associated with the breaking of those rules. It simply invites you to live constantly with the question of what love looks like here and now. And the truth is, love is very demanding.

I think this community understands this, and I'll bet you've encountered the heavy price that comes with the commandment to love. It's a good life and a beautiful covenant, but it's not easy.

So I'll leave you with this blessing that I wrote for my community the last time we had a covenant celebration. I hope it will encourage you to lean into this covenant of love.

Covenant Blessing

This blessing will sound strange to you in a world that confuses blessing with comfort and happiness and ease. The truth is, covenant is a hard blessing.

I bless you to make the kinds of promises that will cost you something. I bless you to share until it feels like you might have made a mistake, like you're on the losing end of this deal.

Hang on though, because this blessing has the long road in mind.

I bless you to bring your whole heart. Gather up every bit of tenderness and courage and strength you can find. You'll need it all. I bless you to risk having your heart broken, and to trust that you'll have companions to mend it again.

I bless you to tell the truth and to hear the truth too. I bless you to recognize the goodness in this, even when it feels unbearable.

It will not always be hard though. I also bless you to laugh and play and rest. I bless you to lay down your burdens and be silly. Don't be fooled into thinking these things don't matter. Your life depends on them.

I bless you to see Jesus in the faces of the people around you. Look around with the eyes of the Holy Spirit. God is near. Always so near.

I bless you to be family, to be dear children and sisters and brothers and fathers and mothers to one another.

Mostly though, I bless you to lean on Jesus, like a kid leans on his mom or dad at the end of a day full of difficulties. I bless you to have a good cry once in a while with this Jesus who adores you, and let him speak words of encouragement to keep you going.

I bless you.

I bless you.