

- 1) On the list of stuff I had to memorize as a kid in Sunday School,
the Ten Commandments were near the top.
A radically condensed version seemed a perfect short cut—
Ten long Commandments in three short words: THOU SHALT NOT.
After all, “SHALT NOT’s,” show up, one way or another, in eight of the ten.
And the other two: *Keep the sabbath holy, and honor your parents*—
to me, they sounded seriously behavior-constricting also.
THOU SHALT NOT’s—make that ten out of ten.
My parents had scruples against going to movies, but, after much soul-searching,
they granted me permission to see *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston;
it being a movie of Biblical proportions.
You saw it?—God dispatching His Top Ten in an ominous bass voice.
Every commandment, one at a time, shot forth from heaven with a thunderbolt—
slamming into a mountain bolder—forging the edict in sizzling flame. {gesture and sound}
Ten *THOU SHALT NOT’s*—absolute, unchanging, eternal prohibitions—disobey them, if you DARE!

- 2) These days, I’m guessing that, for many,
the human face most closely associated with the Ten Commandments
is not that of Charlton Heston, but of Roy Moore, US Senate candidate from Alabama.
And, for many, the emotions evoked by HIS take on the Ten
aren’t awe and fear, but disgust and ridicule.
THOU SHALT NOT’s—the epitome of authoritarianism—
an insistence on living UNDER rules you can then hold OVER everybody else—
with God as the Ultimate, Uncompromising Cosmic Enforcer.

- 3) Now—an image like that sometimes provokes a protest:
That’s an OLD Testament God, a God of WRATH.
The NEW Testament God is One of MERCY, LOVE, and GRACE!
The problem, of course, is there’s lots about God with a SOFT TOUCH in the Hebrew Scriptures.
And lots about God with a HARD NOSE in the Christian Testament.
Case in point: today’s short story by Jesus—definitely NOT a bedtime story for children!
You could hypothesize, that God sometimes plays “Good Cop,” sometimes “Bad.”
But once you’ve heard the harsh voice, it’s hard to trust the gentle voice, isn’t it?
So it might be tempting to dispense with the notion of THOU SHALT NOT’s altogether.
But this has been the week of Las Vegas, hasn’t it?
And what could sound either unduly restrictive or totally irrelevant, suddenly seems neither.

The problem is that—on the other side of the gory details, the heroic saves and sacrificial losses, the flowers and candles and crowdfunding sites—

when it comes down to deciding precisely WHAT to proscribe—

how THOU SHALT NOT should apply is neither obvious nor agreed upon.

Thou shalt not commit murder—how do we translate it into legal statutes and policy strategies?

Thou shalt not PERMIT this firearm—Thou shalt not PREVENT that one—

SHALT NOT with what qualifications—under what conditions?

Still SHALT NOT does seem somehow fundamental—LAW as restriction—LAW as prohibition—

whether its ultimate authority derives from God, from some human source, or from both.

- 4) So it's a bit of an eyebrow-raiser to hear the ancient Israelite Psalm writer describe God's Law not as a divine thunderbolt, not as a moral brickbat, and not as a set of proscriptions that inevitably privilege one interest group over another. No—the Psalmist sings instead about God's Law as a resource treasure more valuable than gold, as a sustaining food source sweeter than honey—as a godsend—literally— one that revives the soul, rejoices the heart, and gives to the innocent wisdom. What does this poet perceive that I totally missed as a kid? That ousted state supreme court justice Roy Moore doesn't seem to sense? That legislators, lawyers, police, litigants, jurists, and ordinary citizens can fail to see? Just this: the Covenant Law of God, is not essentially or primarily a set of restrictive prohibitions; it is—sings the Psalmist—a generous and generative gift.
- 5) Biblical scholars once thought that Psalm 19 was two songs, subsequently stuck together— one about the glories of creation, the other about the virtues of God's law. Most current scholars see the two halves of the Psalm as an integral whole— God's Law as the wordless music animating, energizing all of creation, And that same Law as the articulated melody continually sounding forth in God's own loving interplay with those whom God has made in God's own image. The cosmic ecology of the natural world, and the moral ecology of Covenant Community— the former operating without any coaching; the latter by continuing divine invitation and human response. The songwriter employs a single metaphor to describe how God's law functions in both spheres— the image of the sun—the Law of God giving light to each— not only illuminating all that lives; but making life viable—health and growth possible.
- 6) The same kind of complementarity—two dimensions of law, irreducible but inseparable— is also evident in the two tablets of the Ten Commandments— those that delineate our life-giving relation to our Caring Creator, and those that trace lines of healthy relationship with one another.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes the interconnections this way:

The second tablet is not just a set of good moral ideas, he says.

It contains conditions of viable human life;

non-negotiable conditions rooted in God's own life, and God's ordering of the world.

Thus, it is important to "get it right" about Yahweh, in order to "get it right" about neighbor.

The way of attending to God determines our way of attending to neighbor, and vice versa.

Since these commandments derive from the heart of a liberating God—the Exodus God—

The Ten Commandments, says Brueggemann:

stand as a critical principle of protest against every kind of exploitative social relation

and as a vision of possibility that every social relation can be transformed

and made into a liberating relation.

7) OK—fine—but why frame that liberation in a set of THOU SHALT NOT's? Two answers:

First answer: so that those for whom they were first given could understand them, the commandments were cast in the form of that day's society-framing legal documents.

(Think "Constitution.")

Second answer (and true though the first is, I like this one better):

The relationship between the Ten Commandments and Psalm 19, I think,

is like the relationship between a music score on a printed page,

and the music itself, released from the page when we actually PLAY it—

faithful to the score, but interpreting, even improvising it with situation-sensitive artistry.

And that music so inspiring, we just can't keep from singing.

St. Paul, employs another image—that of running a race.

He speaks about pressing on toward the goal of practicing resurrection.

He's not saying that he's being mercilessly driven by a rule-monger coach.

He's saying that the energy of God's life-giving law revives his soul, rejoices his heart,

and that he just can't keep from running.

8) OK—Fine—but what about the haunting shadow of THOU SHALT NOT

that hangs, thick and heavy, over those greedy, stupid vineyard tenants who don't pay up,

and eventually get plowed under—are we back to God, the Bad Cop, hurling thunderbolts?

Well, there are some details in the story that we may have missed.

In Matthew's telling, it isn't Jesus who pronounces doom, it's those who hear the story.

They know what happens if you insist on messing with The Man—they gambled, they lost.

Jesus characterizes this deeply tragic scenario differently—with more complexity:

The landowner has done everything possible to ensure that his tenants thrive and prosper.

If anyone is stupid, here, he seems the one—sending servant after servant, and finally his son.

All he wants, desperately wants, is a continuing mutual connection.

When the tenants won't give as their benefactor has given,
they bring crashing down upon themselves
the very walls that shape and protect their shared relationship.

Pulling together the different metaphors in the Scripture texts we've heard today:

The tenants close their eyes—they close themselves to the light that gives them life.
The tenants don't just play fast and loose with the music score, they trash it altogether;
and the song of self-assertion they create is sheer cacophony.
The tenants divert the gift of resurrection-running energy into death-dealing energy,
effecting both mass (and self) destruction.

9) Sobering to contemplate—but has that any application to Las Vegas?

It doesn't seem helpful, with Charleston Heston/Roy Moore-like imperious energy,
to issue apodictic divine dictates—from the political left, or the political right.

Not just because democracy isn't theocracy—but because this Heston/Moore energy
plays God's generative, dancing law music as though it were a harsh forced march.

That said—the stakes are high—mass and self-destruction are multiplying.

It's hard to make a convincing case

for hearing uncompromising demands for “freedom” from any and every gun control measure
as the KIND of liberation endorsed by the Exodus God in the Ten Commandments—
which are—as Brueggemann says—*a protest against exploitative social relation,*
and *a vision of possibility that every social relation can be transformed into a liberating relation.*

So the question of moral discernment for People of Faith:

How can we, who read and hear the GRACE notes in the music score of God's Law—
how can we better listen for and contribute to a song more liberating—
one that revives the soul, rejoices the heart,
one that offers wisdom to protect the innocent,
one that gives light to our eyes?