

Thou Shalt Be Different

Exodus 20: 1-17 John 2: 12-22

We're all different in one form another, created that way by a loving, fanciful, humorous, and imaginative Creator who called all of us "good." That is our nature – good – but it is tempered by our flawed side which reveals the ways in which we're not so good. (Thanks, Adam and Eve.) Being all different for starters, we should be able to approach those who are different from us with a sense of sisterly or brotherly affection. I think folks in this church truly do attempt to follow through with that.

However, some folks are more different than others. That could be defined by age, race, ethnicity, economic standing, or a host of other factors. It is possible that more pronounced differences between people make it more difficult to understand them. Their experience of life can be radically different from our own. My daughter's life experience as a 25 year old is vastly different from mine at 62 ½. The experience of life by a black person is vastly different from that of a white person, or of a person from another country whose culture is unlike ours, or of a person who has a particular disability. We can certainly learn from those who are quite different from ourselves, and that's a good thing to do, however awkward it may seem.

On the other hand, these differences can instigate fear, from the mild fear of sounding like a moron when engaging such different folks, to the mindless fear that a different kind of person is a real threat to one's well-being. I don't mind sounding like an idiot; I do that all the time. I do mind getting stabbed or robbed or beaten. Maybe my instinctive reaction that someone is a threat has some real basis, but maybe I'm just threatened by how different the person is. It's good to do a reality check on oneself to try to understand what caused your panicked reaction to another child of God.

One of the things churches struggle with is being different. Not that there are different churches, but that there are such narrower differences inside the churches among the people within them. Churches tend to be hives of people-like-me, whatever that church may be. If you were to plot on a chart the race, age, and income level in every congregation, large or small, you would likely find the majority clumping into one or more categories of similarity. That's a guess and quite unscientific, but I think you know what I mean.

Then there's the fact that we're people of faith, people of a particular faith. How different are we from other people of faith? How different are we from people of no particular faith? People of faith seem to be regular, ol' people; nothing special, upright bipeds, loud, smelly, and sinful. Then when faith is called out, there is a new path for them to pursue, a new manner of conduct, even a new self-understanding and identity.

In the Exodus passage, Moses receives the Ten Commandments, having led this newly embraced people of God into freedom from oppression. Throughout the whole saga, God has had an opportunity to discover how disagreeably sinful people could be. Clearly, they need direction, but not a big, crazy list. How about a top ten list? Only

these ten items are all **equally** important. You have to be clear about this with sports fans who may think the first commandment is in first place and is therefore better than the tenth commandment ... which is like the Giants last year.

It begins with God identifying himself. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery* not only identifies this God and his power apart from any other god these people may be devoted to, but it also reminds the people that they did **not** achieve liberation from slavery and deliverance to the Promised Land by their own abilities.

‘Had it not been for the works of the Lord your God, you’d still be baking bricks for Pharaoh in Egypt. You people were graced with the blessing of the Lord your God. The only righteous thing you did was to follow instructions, and even those were a challenge for you. Now, here are some further instructions. Let’s see if you can obey these as well.’

The first three instructions follow on this opening theme, that there is one God and only one God, and you people need to get that clearly figured out.

First, there is no other god, no other power, no other force, no other entity in heaven above or earth below deserving your devotion, sacrifice, service, and praise than the one God who has been present for you and formed his covenant promise with you.

Second, don’t be really foolish and think that you can fashion your own god in some way, materially or imaginatively, that somehow deserves your devotion, sacrifice, service, and praise. If you think God will be amused by your corruption of the faith and devotion due to God alone, guess again.

Like the second, the **third** says, if you call upon the Lord your God, you better not be attempting to manipulate, exploit, or abuse the name and power of the Lord your God for some narrow, personal or private benefit.

God knows something about his people. Given the opportunity, they will try to manipulate God to be whatever they want God to be, for whatever occasion they might conceive of. The prime emphasis of the Ten Commandments is that God is not a plaything, or a tool, or a way of gaining the upper hand, or a cover for anything.

Now, once you – God’s people – have understood that God is not a concept, a reality, or an ideal **to be manipulated**, then God wants you to know God’s way in basic terms. That’s what the remaining commandments are about.

Remember the Sabbath day when work shall cease. This is not only for your benefit, but also shows the discipline of your time for the sake of your faith and devotion to the Lord your God, rather than being devoted to your own personal ambition, profit or pleasure. Your honoring the Sabbath is an honor to God as well as a time when “in keeping it holy” you shall turn to the Lord your God for new insights in living faithfully and for course corrections that are sure to be needed.

There are six more instructions, essentials defining the terms of interactions among the people of God's covenant with all others. The way of God teaches respect, peace, fidelity, integrity and humility. Calvin sums up these commandments in one word: "charity." In many ways, it parallels God's own attitude and activity toward his covenant people. We're essentially called to do likewise. We're taught God's way. We're taught that being faithful means being different, traveling a different path.

In the passage about Jesus at the Jerusalem Temple, we see how Jesus encounters those who would manipulate the presence of God for their own purposes. Jesus' rampage focuses on the merchants and moneychangers, but his wrath is really aimed at *a whole system* that has authored corruption by manipulating the way of God and the obedience of God's people into a scheme of profit and exploitation.

People need to practice a new and different understanding that comes with being faithful to God. Money isn't just money, business isn't just business, and that everybody does it this way is no longer a valid justification or a meaningful excuse. Faithful is different; faithful people are different.

Having reviewed the first commandments and their nature as the basic understanding of God for faithful people, we see at the Temple the exact behavior condemned by the commandments. God's place *and* name *and* grace *and* adoration are **all** being abused, manipulated, exploited, and corrupted.

This scandalous behavior has been so **normalized** that Jesus' outburst in protest and rebellious resistance stuns everyone. They're clueless about his rage and objection; they were just doing business as usual. The authorities challenge him. Jesus tries to direct them to the power, life and ways of the true God, what's worthy of faith and devotion, but they're simply confused.

When God is allowed to be God, transcending narrow agendas and standing sovereign over worldly schemes rather than being wedded to them, then we can pursue what is truly sacred and not some fake imitation, not some manipulation.

Our scriptures this morning warn us that there are many who would exploit God, and many ways in which people would manipulate God to serve their own purposes. And yes, we could be culprits as well.

Hopefully, we'll not be so deluded, disconnected, and confused. The truth of our faithfulness depends entirely on our awareness and understanding of the complete sovereignty of God, of his requirement that our devotion and our wills be directed toward God alone, and toward what God seeks to occur in order to bring justice, peace, equity, and new life into God's creation. God wants our life's pursuit to be toward what is truly sacred, serving the promise of new life for all.

As we configure our faith and devotion in this Lenten season, our eyes must sharpen their focus on the Lord our God. We're called to submit any and every agenda to

God's sovereign authority. May we seek the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, asking for the blessing of discernment that would align our hearts, minds, and spirits in one direction and toward one purpose, of the Lord our God alone, pursuing what is truly sacred.

Then we shall be changed. Then we shall be truly different.