

Faithful Is Different

Exodus 20: 1-17 John 2: 13-22

I gave you my saga about my uncooperative cell phone last Sunday. There is a second part to the story. Since I use my cell phone so infrequently and in general, regardless of the phone, I loathe any cell phone due to the onset of premature old fogeyness, the most cost effective service for me is Tracfone. I don't need a fancy smart phone, so I don't have to finance it with a contract. I don't need unlimited anything, so I don't need to pay \$40 per month. If I use it 10 times a month, it's only because people keep calling me on the stupid thing, like that's how I want to be contacted. On the other hand, my son easily uses his iPhone 10 times per hour. So a pay-as-you-go plan is ideal, and Tracfone is the cheapest and still most effective service.

Clearly I have a screwed up cell phone as you can tell from my histrionics last week. However, I still have the previous phone, a "basic" or dumb phone from Tracfone, and it worked perfectly fine. (This "smart" phone that I had bought seemed like a cheap way to move up to a smart phone.) Now I have this simple idea; I should reactivate the old phone and move my minutes and service time back to the old phone because frankly I don't really need a smart phone, just something portable that works well as a phone. Period.

I try to do it online, but it says it can't be done. I need to call Customer Service. After a brief wait, I speak to rep. I tell her I have a new phone that doesn't work well. I want to move back to my old phone. She says that I *can* do that, but I will lose the 500 minutes. I asked why. She tells me that these are Android minutes, not basic phone minutes. You can't put Android minutes on a basic phone, she advised in that tone that implies I'm so silly for such having such an off-the-wall thought.

Again I ask, why not? She says it's because they're Android minutes and Android minutes can't go on a basic phone. "I don't understand," I persist. "I bought those minutes as basic phone minutes on my old phone. When I got the Android phone, I transferred basic phone minutes to my Android phone. Now I want to move those basic phone minutes back to the phone from which they originated."

She tried to explain to me how Android minutes are different from basic phone minutes since they go into three buckets, data, text and voice. Basic phone minutes don't come like that and that's why you can't turn Android minutes into basic phone minutes. You can't Android minutes from three different buckets and turn them into basic phone minutes. I said, "Those three buckets are text, data, and voice. All I want is voice because that's the only kind of minutes that I bought in the first place."

"No," she said, "they may be in three different buckets but you can't pick a bucket to take the minutes from."

I tried one more approach. "Look, these are minutes. They aren't marbles, cards, or kitchen sinks. They are an abstraction of time. Regardless of what your system will let

you do, can't you simply wipe out the minutes on the new phone and create the same number of minutes on the old phone?" She said that wasn't possible. I added, "I have an app that tells me how many minutes I have on my account. It says very clearly the exact number of minutes. Why can't that amount, which Tracfone says that I have, be moved to my old phone one way or another."

I would go on to talk to three more reps before finally giving up. What I learned is that a simple concept like minutes that would seem to be very clear, defined, and standardized, are in fact something entirely different in the world of Tracfone wireless. In that world, there are Android minutes and there are basic phone minutes, and the two should never be confused. Minutes are no longer minutes; they've been redefined, segregated, separated, elevated, transformed. I thought it was simple; a minute is a minute. No, it now has new meaning.

People of faith are like this, too. They 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 some very clear direction, but not a big, crazy list. How about a top ten list? Only these ten items are all equally important; the top ten design is not a ranking. 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.

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 a 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 and praise than the one God who has been present for you and formed his promise in covenant 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 and praise. If you think God will be amused by your corruption of the worship, 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 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 praise and course correction.

There are six more instructions, essentials defining the terms of interactions among the people of God's covenant. 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.

Like me with Tracfone and the difference between basic phone minutes and Android minutes, you need to understand that there is a new and different understanding that comes with being faithful to God. Minutes aren't just minutes, 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.

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* praise 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. 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 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. God wants our pursuit to be of what is truly sacred and nothing else.

As we configure our faith and devotion in this Lenten season, our eyes must always be focused on the Lord our God, submitting any and every agenda to his 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.