

Sermon for Sunday 4 October 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday
Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14 ; Matthew 21:33-46
"Clarity"

Suddenly, our set of scriptures takes a sharp turn.

Today we find ourselves, not with a family story, but a set of rules.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

"Thou shalt not kill."

"Honor thy father and thy mother.

"Thou shalt not covet."

We can take each of these ancient rules apart, adapt them to modern situations, allowing them to be bigger than literal, but still plain and obvious most of the time.

More of our country's budget goes towards preparation for killing than anything else ... yet we know, deep down, that we're on the wrong track to say that self-defense is the most important thing we can do together.

And even though we don't obey the Ten Commandments, it helps to have such goals spelled out, one by one, both for ourselves personally, and for us as a nation and a global village.

My child can gradually come to personhood with these guidelines all around, repeated over and over by those who love and guide. Being big means being responsible, just like being little but moreso.

It helps, in other words, to have some clarity about things.

I preached about that last Sunday. I said I was cheered at the number of offices we've filled for the new year, as we prepare reports and get ready to have charge conference with the district superintendent. I said it was inspiring to listen to some conversations over how we understand things better when we listen to one another's strong views. That seems like holy ground, like fellowship in the serious sense.

And now we get these scriptures, expanding the clarity of our religious principles, today. We can argue over them ... but they have stood for a long time in their simple way, as Scripture does; good boundary-lines: We shouldn't be mainly defending ourselves. Helping each other makes more sense. Even having successful careers doesn't deserve the attention we give it: Being a good human being is deeper than just "succeeding," wouldn't you say?

But wait a minute. It's 8 a.m. last Friday, and the phone rings, and a friend says, "Did you hear? Trump and his wife have the virus."

Clarity.

I'm not one to cheer. Much as I oppose the President, I've been disgusted at those who say, "Let's see how he takes it, now."

All I was able to stumble out with was, "I guess we've got more than ever to pray about."

I did reflect, as I went about the day, that, bad as religion can be, we'll always have it, one way or another, simply because you just can't tell what's going to happen next, and we all want some kind of control over things, whether we get foolish about hunting for it or not.

And later on, I thought, listening to the radio, how much we treat all the news like entertainment ... as though we have no part in the way things are going, no responsibility to put our oar in and pull for the better direction.

We have so much. Even the poorest among us are so much better off than much of the world!

But it is true, isn't it, that we really don't run the show; that, as the saying goes, "Everything we need to know we learned in kindergarten," and that respect for one another, and trying to make things better, goes a long way towards a real life purpose?

Isn't that clear? Doesn't that give us some direction, most of the time?

Isn't there conviction here among us, as another scripture puts it, that love is stronger than death?

Honestly, that's enough clarity for a lifetime, I believe.

What about you?

Through Jesus Christ,

Amen.