

Proper 22 October 8, 2023 Year A

Our first reading is the giving of the Ten Commandments to Israel on Mt. Sinai. God reminds us that he is the God who freed them from slavery in Egypt. So he is, in light of this, worthy of being accepted, affirmed and fully obeyed. He appears on Mt. Sinai in thunder and lightning, the sound of a trumpet and smoke which covers the mountain. The Israelites are terrified of this display of power and holiness. Moses tells them that God is testing them to fear him so they do not sin.

What is God up to? He is starting to fulfill his promise to Abraham and his descendants to make them a great nation. How do you make a great nation out of a bunch of slaves? You create a distinct Community with its own laws and culture. First by uniting them in devotion to the God who liberated them. Second, by binding them in a common life. This is the purpose of the commandments.

Religious communities are organized in the same way. We are united in devotion to Jesus Christ and we live according to a rule which covers all aspects of our life together.

The first four Commandments are about our relationship with God. God wants our loyalty and respect. We shall not worship any other God. We are not to make a person, place or thing an idol to be worshipped. We can make an idol out of anything. An idol is a substitute for our loyalty to God: career, politics, relationships, even our own wellbeing. Next is the Commandment not to misuse the name of God: for instance, to condone cultural evils. Last is honoring the Sabbath. Our culture measures our worth by our productivity. God says our worth is found in being his people. We rest because God rested after the work of creation.

The three Commandments, prohibitions of murder, adultery and theft address the possibility that vulnerable persons in Community will be assaulted, diminished and destroyed. The Commandment not to bear false witness reminds us that viable human community depends on truth telling.

The Commandment against coveting is necessary because acquiring land or property in a way that destabilizes the property or life of another is evil. The closing of Hahnemann Hospital in North Philadelphia by venture capitalists in order to build more profitable condos is an example. This commandment also should cause us to examine our need to consume more and more of the world's resources.

Our relationship with God impacts the health of our Christian Community. These commandments are not a check list. Rather they are essential to maintain a community of God in Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul is making the same point that he made in his letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians. It is that following the exacting external rules of religion does not produce righteousness but self-righteousness. He uses his own life as an example. He was so zealous for his beliefs that he persecuted those who followed Jesus.

Think of the Puritans. They were so determined to have a pure and Godly colony that they used their government to persecute those who didn't conform to their beliefs. They ended up hanging Quakers. It's one of the reasons we have separation of church and state. hhh What changed Paul? It was an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus completely turned Paul around. All his struggle to be righteous by his own efforts to reach God were to no avail. Instead, Jesus reached out to Paul.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew need to have a warning label which reads "this has been used as an excuse for antisemitism". It is used in order to imply that God has abandoned the Jewish people and replaced them with the church. This rationalization has led to all manner of persecution of Jews culminating in the Holocaust.

In this parable the landowner is God and the vineyard is God's kingdom. The tenants are the Jewish leadership which refuses to deliver the good work that he expects. The servants that the landowner has sent to receive the fruits are the prophets. And in fact, they did reject and sometimes killed the prophets. Finally, the landowner sends his son, and obvious reference to Jesus, whom they also reject and kill.

So, who are the tenants who have the Kingdom taken away from them? Considering all the arguments that Jesus is having with chief priest and the Pharisees, it is obvious that they are the ones who lose the Kingdom. It is not aimed at the whole Jewish nation-some of them became Jesus' disciples. Jesus was not creating the Church, he called for Israel to be reformed.

By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written the Romans had crushed the Jewish revolt, destroyed the Temple and the Jewish nation. The followers of Jesus ow included Gentiles as well as Jews. Were they the renewed people of God? Perhaps Matthew thought so. Does this justify the persecution of the Jews? The answer is No!

According to Paul the Apostle, the church has been grafted like a wild olive branch into the cultivated tree. We owe our older brothers a lot. We took from them the Psalms, the shape of our liturgy and our sense of God's justice and mercy. Paul saw a larger plan of God that embraced both Israel and the church.

So, what is the solution? I can only suggest mutual respect and repentance for our past actions.