

“Both Sides Now”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on October 2nd 2011 (16th Sunday after Pentecost/World-wide Communion)
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Exodus 20: 1-21

Let’s be clear at the outset. We have landed, this morning, smack-dab at the centre, at the beating heart, of that portion of our scriptures we name as the Old Testament. Dead centre is what this text represents: the heart...and in some ways the soul...of the Old Testament. For while it may well be the case that a typical English translation of the Old Testament runs some 850 pages, and the 20th chapter of Exodus will typically be found well before a reader has arrived at even the 100th page: from a thematic point-of-view, everything that comes before the giving of the Ten Commandments is an extended prologue, and everything subsequent to their giving only makes sense if read in light of the 20th chapter of Exodus.

For it is here...right here...at Mount Sinai, where a motley group of freshly liberated slaves is transformed into a people. It is here...right here...at Mount Sinai, that an identity-less assortment of human odds and ends—with no fixed address and seemingly no identifiable purpose on this earth—find themselves branded with God’s own logo, enlivened with the promise of a home to call their own, and entrusted with a mission of God’s own design. Above all...above all...here at Sinai, Jacob’s sons and daughters—the children of Israel—are given the opportunity to receive (an opportunity to which, in fear and trembling, they assent)...an opportunity to receive the Law and an opportunity to attempt to live under that Law. What comes before this: a magnificent prologue! What follows: the at times tragic working out of what it meant for this people to have said “yes” to the proposal God places before them at Sinai. And the bottom line is this.

At the heart of the whole sprawling story...the story we call the Old Testament...at the heart of this story stands Sinai. And at the heart of Sinai stands ten words...ten invitations to a life of righteousness...Ten Commandments.

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An older generation...an older generation of mainly Jewish, mainly liberal Jewish Biblical theologians, had a characteristic—and mainly helpful— phrase with which to encapsulate *their* understanding of that which transpired on Mount Sinai. Some of you may be familiar with that phrase. Ethical monotheism. Monotheism...meaning the worship of one God. *Ethical* monotheism. Ethical...meaning the worship of a God who is profoundly concerned with *how* we live our lives vis a vis the other members of the human community.

And I think it's fair to suggest a sense in which the key word in that formulation is the first of those two words: the word "ethical." To shift, momentarily, from the giving of the Law on Sinai to the subsequent evolution of the prophetic office in ancient Israel: those who were especially concerned with emphasizing Judaism's ethical monotheism (and, by extension, Christianity's roots in ethical monotheism)...they were keen to remind us that the first prophets were known as prophets mainly because of the ecstatic state into which they would fly, and the ecstatic speech into which they would erupt during a spell of ecstasy. Clearly the measure of prophecy, forged through such experiences, had more to do with the dramatic trappings of the experience than with the content of any teaching that might emerge through the experience. On that basis, then, it is easy to see the evolution of Israelite prophecy from those fiery—but in many ways unpromising beginnings—to the profound appeals for justice and righteousness that ring forth from the likes of Amos and Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah: appeals that fill the pages of the Old Testament, appeals which most certainly *are* to be numbered among those texts that are likeliest to be included in the list of texts that most clearly exhibit the ethical monotheism—the ethical monotheism—of the Old Testament.

That the Ten Commandments are also to be included in any such list is not to be doubted. One occasionally bumps into contemporary scholarly treatments of the Ten Commandments that deride them for their stark limitation as time-bound texts that come to us from a culture in which a wide-range of attitudes and practices we tend to find abhorrent were still gladly countenanced. To my way of thinking, however, that would be as foolish as dismissing the achievement of a Thomas Edison because he failed to reproduce sound with the same fidelity with which solid state technologies can reproduce sound. Edison was a remarkable pioneer, a key contributor to the evolution of recorded sound; the Ten Commandments—by placing moral responsibility at the centre of the life of the Spirit—played a no less decisive role in the evolution of humanity's religious and ethical sensitivities and sensibilities.

Nor should we, in the United Church of Canada, overlook the extent to which we are part of a 500 year old movement within Christendom: a movement which has especially identified itself with the ethical dimension of the Gospel and the ethical mandates of our Biblical heritage. From our Calvinist forebears (i.e. our Presbyterian ancestors) derives our suspicion of anything that smacks of superstition: in other words, a suspicion of anything that distracts us from the real business of being a Christian, namely living responsibly through the day. From our Methodist forebears derives our passion for bringing the Gospel into the highways and byways of the communities in which we have been planted: in other words, a desire to live responsibly and generously in every facet of our own lives and every facet of the life of the world. In contrast: of rites and rituals, spiritual practices and processes, mysticism and mystagogy we have been...and for the most part we remain...wary if not downright sceptical. To which, I hasten to add: that combination of wariness of anything that smacks of empty ritual, coupled with a passionate desire to live responsible lives, has stood us in good stead for the better part of five centuries. Mainline Protestantism has never been the largest Christian grouping...but for a significant stretch over the past 500 years, we have been a profoundly influential shaper of the modern world. And yet...and yet!

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Those of you with keen memories and a love of pop music will, no doubt, have caught the song allusion in my sermon title. Beyond the obvious connection between my use of that title and Joni Mitchell's magical song, the deeper connection involves the way in which we human beings are always needing to wrestle with illusions: in our case this morning not the "cloud" illusions Joni's song recalls, but the illusion that it is possible for either the church corporately, or disciples individually, to sustain a life of high moral vision, a life of high ethical integrity, minus the sustenance and nurture of the Holy One. Too often, I fear, too often we have managed to so emphasize the "ethical" in that two word formulation, that we have managed to leave on the cutting room floor the adventure of "monotheism", the adventure of journeying with the one God, along with the magnificent love-story—the story of the passionate love—into which the one God has entered in the name of Jesus Christ. Alas, that tendency inevitably leads to loss of vision, loss of hope, and spiritual death.

And we need go no further than our Ten Words—our Ten Commandments—to recognize the intricate and indissoluble link the Biblical tradition establishes between responsible living and a life grounded in relationship with God. First, the commandments tell us what it means to be in right relationship with God. Then, and only then, are we shown how right relationship with God extends into right relationship with human beings, those who—like we ourselves—bear God's own image. When we attempt to tear those two things apart, we are bound to hit a wall. On the one hand, when we seek right relationship with God without seeking right relationship with our sisters and brothers, our religion becomes superficial; on the other hand, when we attempt right relationship with our neighbours without entering into deeper relationship with God, our religion becomes dry, brittle and potentially strident. Both sides are needed. Both sides now!

And, of course, it is from the vantage point of this table—this table to which we are called with special urgency on this Worldwide Communion Sunday—it is from the vantage point of this table that we can perhaps best see both sides: both sides now. For while it may be true that we are here as part of a profoundly communal feast, we dare not lose sight of the fact that this is, first and foremost, *God's table!*

Ponder! Ponder if you will the communal side of that equation. Think about the countless hands that have made this feast possible for us today, and not merely the Knox hands that have laid the table but those who grew and processed wheat and grape, those who packaged and shipped and marketed the bread and juice which grace this table. Ponder all of those hands, ponder that rich mix of humanity, and then recall our responsibility—our Biblical mandate—to live rightly, justly, compassionately in the midst of that Global Community. But having done that...

...having pondered the communal dimension—the human dimension that is part and parcel of every communion meal...

...having recalled that dimension and our responsibility and accountability within that human dimension...

...let us never fail to see the other side! Let us never fail to hold together both sides: both sides now. And what is that other side?

This is God's table, too! This, indeed, is God's table even prior to it having become *our* table. And on this...on this Worldwide Communion Sunday...we can do a lot worse, in response to the question, who is this God we worship...

...we can do a lot worse than to reply: ours is the God who came to us in Christ, that we might be nourished, that we might be nurtured for the journey, that our deepest hungers might be met for the living of these days, that our sharpest thirst might be quenched as we walk the road to wholeness. Above all...above all:

That we might be reminded again and again...

...precisely in our search for right-living...perhaps especially in our times of forgetting and discouragement...

...that we might be reminded each time we come to this table, that we are not alone. We live in God's world!

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Thanks be to God!

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