

Proper 22           “Looking for sweetness”

Texts: Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20 and Matthew 21:33-46

Wednesday's Spectator talks about a soccer club on the West mountain that had to fight to survive this summer when they discovered their president, a neighbour, seems to have taken 50K from their funds. Tuesday's Spectator talked about a police officer who has been fired because of repeated sexual advances made upon women. Last Saturday described a man who may have killed his 3 year old daughters. Another day described an argument on Greenaway St that turned into a knifing: anger that turned to violence. For a few weeks now we have been hearing about the attackers on villagers in Syria. Every week, without fail, The magazines at the grocery store cashier proclaim the latest betrayals and cheating among the movie stars. Advertisements in the paper, and on billboards, and on the radio bombard us every day with encouragement to covet what we do not have, things that, apparently, our neighbours do have: beautiful bodies, silky hair, big houses, fast cars, a carefree happy life. We don't have to look very far at all to be reminded of the relevance of at least a few of the 10 commandments. We can't help but be glad for the laws in our land, laws based upon the 10 commandments, that prohibit and hopefully thus contain somewhat our perennial temptations as human beings: to lie, cheat, steal and betray each other. These commandments protect us. We need them. Maybe that is why the psalmist calls the Law "sweet."

Most of us surely learned the 10C as children, probably instilled in us with some urgency, and perhaps severity: these were rules of life, from God, which we break at our peril, with obvious consequences. Some of us grew up hearing them read, in their entirety, every single Sunday.

But here is the interesting part. In conversations this week I discovered that I am not the only one for whom these "words of life" have come accompanied with a sense of fear. Someone said: "I didn't learn about Jesus growing up. I had never heard that Jesus was "alive"; I had only heard the 10 commandments, and *they made me afraid.*"

Why would these commandments make us afraid? If they are really for our protection, and for our good? Why do they make us afraid, if they are "words of life", if they are supposed to be "sweeter than honey"? We know how chaotic our lives would be without them. So, we would really like it if everyone else could follow these. So why are the 10C associated with fear?

I suppose they come with fear because we know that they are hard to keep. We know that we will be tempted, and we will surely fail to keep them, in small or big ways. These commandments KNOW US all too well. They know exactly how we will be tempted. It is a bit scary when we realize that our underside, our temptations, our inevitable failings are VERY WELL KNOWN. We are also probably afraid because of the punishment we will inevitably experience when we do break them, and the shame, perhaps public shame. I think we are afraid because these 10C face us with who we are, and it is not too pretty.

Maybe as we grow older we also realize that these 10 C, as fine as they are, are really not adequate, by themselves, for the complexities of life. We can come into situations that pit one commandment against another. The story line of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* revolves around the fate of a man who had been imprisoned for stealing some bread to feed his sister's 7 children, and is sent to prison. He did indeed break a civil law, and a commandment, but our sympathies lie with him. A legalistic "Do not steal" does not adequately deal with situations of entrenched social injustice, where some are wealthy and others starving. Some would say that a legalistic "do not kill" doesn't either. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a teacher of Christian ethics, was part of a plot to take Hitler's life. And maybe the commandment "Do not lie" is not adequate when a person asks a young boy "Is your father a drunk?" What if the father does have an addiction? But the question is not asking with loving intention? What would be the "truthful" and loving answer in that case? The inadequacy of the Law as a guide for life was obvious to Jesus when he spoke with the Pharisees who are somehow able to "follow the law" but neglect justice and mercy. As our gospel lesson puts it so starkly, something is really wrong when those who make it their aim in life to "follow the Law" end up putting to death the Son who has come to fulfil the Law, for he embodies the root and deepest purpose of the Law, which is love.

As we grow older we also see how these rules can be used as a weapon: the pregnant teenage girl brought before a church while her male counterpart is not, or while the ones judging her hide their covetous hearts in their big garages and their closets and their jewellery drawers. These 10 words of life are turned into rocks that we throw at one another, pointing out each others' sins and failings. Nowhere, after all, does it say "Be compassionate with each other." Nowhere in the 10 C does it say "Forgive one another"

Or does it? Is it there but we don't really see it?

I have laid out the 10C in 3 different ways on your insert. The first is probably the most common way we think about the 10: as a list, a list like many other lists in our lives, things we should do, things we will try to "get done." The 2<sup>nd</sup> way draws attention to the way the first 4 commandments emphasize our relationship with God, and the following 6 emphasize how we relate to our neighbours. So we have a vertical axis and a horizontal. The third way of portraying them, though, only came to me in the last few weeks. I have never seen it like this. What if we imagined the first 4 as the foundation that hold the 6? We could think of the 4 as a kind of cradle, perhaps made of cupped hands. What if the only way the 6 can be "sweet like honey" is when we know that we are held, and cradled? What if we imagine rays of energy and love coming out of that cradle, supporting us gently, encouraging us, because those hands know that we will never succeed on our own, that the only way we can live creatively is by paying attention to the hands that hold us. I have heard it said that for all the good they do, the real intention of the Law is to make us realize how impossible it is to keep them, and so to

push us into God's mercy. Jesus says that calling someone a fool is along the same lines as murder. To think we can "fulfil" the law by our own effort is simply impossible.

So maybe it's worth pondering a little on those 4, and what they are trying to give us, how they are trying to bless us. The one about Sabbath, for instance. I know that many of us received it in a strict and joyless way, that prohibited us from doing anything interesting on Sundays. But its intention is love: that we would be able to rest one day/ week, and joyfully remember God's delight in us, God's delight in creating us, God's delight in sustaining us. The 10 C are prefaced, after all, with the "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage."

I guess the question is: Do the 4 help us not only live the 6, but also live with our failure to keep the 6? Can the experience of being cradled and held by a deeply tender and compassionate God actually work some transformation in our hearts that enables us to love our neighbours and ourselves? Is it really possible for the Law to get written onto our hearts, so that it is part of us, it becomes what we want to do, and we also stop throwing rocks at one another and treat one another with justice and kindness?

That seems to be the story of the Bible; that seems to be what it is all about: that as we turn our eyes towards the person Jesus *who can do no other than love, who comes to us only with forgiveness, who comes to us at the fulfilment of the Law in his very body*, our hands go limp and the rocks we had been clutching to defend ourselves fall to the ground as this fragrance of sweetness, like honey, surrounds us and fills us. And we are "satisfied" as with a rich feast, maybe for the first time in our lives, and we begin to wonder why we were so afraid. O taste and see that the Lord is good. O taste and see that the Lord is sweet.

It is seeking this sweetness that we will come, in a few minutes, to the feast that has been prepared for us by one who loves us beyond all measure.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church

Hamilton, Ontario

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October 5, 2014