

“Our One and Only”

I've always been somewhat anxious about taking tests. Maybe some of you can relate to me on this. I even get a little nervous when taking the eye exam at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. I put my face up to that contraption on the counter, look at the first image displayed, and suddenly my breathing gets a little more shallow. My heart beats a bit faster. I concentrate really hard. This is an overreaction, I know, but it feels like I'm about to be tested and I want to do my best. I want to pass the test, give the right answers. It's hard to guess your way through something like that. I can't shake the feeling that there's a lot at stake if I don't meet the standard required. Like I say, I'm overreacting. And why? Maybe I don't want to let the State of Ohio down. Or, maybe there's something else at work here.

Most of us, and it's probably not an exaggeration to say all of us, want to be our best. I think this is especially true of people who are religious, folks like us. Folded into the choice we make to live for God is an inherent sense of right and wrong. We recognize there is a faithful way to live, a way of life that is in sync with God's purpose and will. This means there is the other path, too, the way that turns from God, a way that ultimately can hurt us and others. Those who choose the way of faith know this choice is not a “one and done” kind of thing. In fact, opportunities to choose faith, to side with God, come every day and some of that experience feels like we are being put to the test. What does God want from us? What does God expect, and will we choose correctly and meet the standard God requires?

Today, we turn to the Old Testament to a place in scripture that is familiar, even to those who don't know much about the bible. The Ten Commandments are listed in the 20th chapter of The Book of Exodus. To set the stage, Moses and the Hebrews have come to the base of Mount Sinai, its summit the place where The Law is etched on stone tablets. Let's be reminded before we go on that God and the people have already been in a relationship for a long time. As the Bible says, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This means that when Moses comes along to set the people free from their slavery in Egypt, and then guides them through the wilderness to the promised land, generations of a covenant faith have been in place. Now, at the mountain, the covenant that was placed on the hearts of the Hebrews is put in writing. God has promised to always be there for the people and the people have promised to always be there for God. A divine-human handshake on the deal will not do. Spoken words don't hold enough power for what's coming. And so, the covenant is etched in rock so the people will have no doubt about what is involved when choosing the pathway of faith. These stones upon which The Ten Commandments are written have weight and this is appropriate because the people's commitment to the covenant will be tested throughout their history. Will they remain firm in the promise? I think it's the moral weightiness of The Ten Commandments that presents a problem for us. Oh, we're familiar with them, as I've said. We can probably name most of them, but we don't live constantly checking ourselves against these ancient rules. Maybe that is because we don't like to be tested, or at least we don't want to live with the constant reminder that we are just one poor decision away from failing. To think about The Ten Commandments is to resign ourselves to the fact that we do the best we can and if we slip up, well, that's just part of being human. God knows we try, and isn't that enough?

Through the season of Lent, we've been reminded that this is a time to reflect on what it means to live with God and to follow the way of Jesus. In the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, there is a gathering of a crowd and they are there with Jesus at the base of a hillside, which calls to mind the scene of Moses addressing the people at Mount Sinai. This section of Jesus' teaching we call, “The Sermon on the Mount.” (Matt. 5-7) Like our reading for today when Moses delivers The Law, the commandments, Jesus teaches what it looks like when God is at the center of our lives. We are reminded that Jesus said he did not come to abolish The Law. In fact, through his words, the lessons he taught, and by way of his actions, including his death on the cross, Jesus points to what he describes as the fulfillment of The Law. All of which connects to the day the religious authorities tried to entrap Jesus by asking him which commandment was the greatest. Jesus refused to give a ranking. He would not be forced into listing the top ten or any other kind of numbering, as if our life in faith is some kind of “TO DO” list we can check off. What Jesus did was bring to life a New Covenant, a way of life that deepens our relationship with God. What commandment do we need to know? What rule of life must we follow? This, according to Jesus, is what matters most of all, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest...commandment.” (Matt. 22:37-38) Jesus knew everything else flows from this.

Our reading from Exodus focuses on the first of The Ten Commandments and this connects to what Jesus taught. “You shall have no other gods before me,” (Exo. 20:2), says the one who has created us and who gives us life. Everything else flows from this. THE God knows there can be no other gods in our lives. This is a season of reflection. To whom or to what do we give ourselves? Are there smaller gods who beckon us? Do we give ourselves to a particular ideology, political or otherwise? Do we commit our whole selves to a particular lifestyle or to an

image of what it means to be successful or is everything we are about for the purpose of proving ourselves right or that we are the winner, no matter who gets hurt in the process or tossed aside? The lesser and little gods in this world are whoever or whatever grabs the center of our minds and hearts, and leaves no room for THE God to take up residence there. Faithfulness is not knowing all the rules and following them without making a mistake. Faithfulness is loving God with all our heart and soul and mind, and being vigilant that no other gods will push their way to the center of our lives.

In the end, faith is not one test after the other. Faith is one opportunity after the other, opportunities to choose God. Everyday we receive the invitation to place God at the center and to walk more consistently with Jesus. When we decide what matters most, when we choose how to respond to another person, when we react to those who are different, when we decide what we'll give or keep for ourselves - time after time the opportunity is before us to choose God and everything else will flow from there.

The words of the simple praise song are a good end to the preaching today. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."