

11th Sunday After Pentecost
August 9, 2015
Marley United Methodist Church

John 13.34-35, 14.15-17, 23-24
Matt 22.34-46

The Greatest Commandment

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition to the Christian Church, I hold membership in two other organizations. I have referred to them in the past as illustrations of one point or another in a sermon. Both of them have a code of conduct which describes what their members should be like. Many of you may recognize Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean and Reverent. Fewer of you may recognize Courtesy, Modesty, Integrity, Perseverance, Self-Control and an Indomitable Spirit. That surely is quite a list – 18 words describing who I should be. Also there is the implication that participation in the organization will help develop those characteristics – so it is true to say they describe what I should be and also what I should become.

These words are not rules or prohibitions describing behavior from which I should abstain. There is no penalty for breaking or failing in any of these. I won't get thrown out if I don't keep them, they are simply there, set before me to remind me what I am supposed to be. The first 12 words begin "A Scout is. . ." and the second set begins "Tae Kwon Do aims to achieve. . ." These words are a description of what I am supposed to be – not necessarily all at once magically overnight, but what I am supposed to become. And because I believe in what these organizations stand for and, in gratitude for what they have done for my personal development, I WANT to be like that. I don't have to – but I want to live up those 18 words. Not because it is my duty - but because it is a privilege to try.

I could preach a whole sermon series on the fact that we are saved by grace and not by our obedience to the law and maybe Pastor Steph will do that.

It is a fact that we can't obey the law, whether it is the whole 613 restrictions of the rabbinic law or just the 2 to love God and our neighbor we heard in today's reading. We can't do it – and so, because God loved us, Jesus paid the debt, took our punishment on himself and set us free from the law. We live free by that gift of God's grace.

A careful reading of Paul's letters to the Galatians will tell us that if we put ourselves under the law again we are re-instating our condition before Jesus died for us, namely, that we are guilty under the law and subject to punishment. Once we've been set free by the sacrifice of Jesus, if we put ourselves under the law again – he will have died in vain. Yes, I know that's pretty tough language, but that is what the Bible says. (Gal 2.21) Paul goes on to say "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery (to the law)" Gal 5.1

We are saved by grace, not by our works or how well we keep the rules, we are justified by faith, not by keeping the law. We are free!!

Imagine if all the speed limit signs, all the stop signs and the yield signs and all the traffic lights were taken down overnight and we were told to 'be courteous' and 'drive safely'. What we are given in our spiritual life is the equivalent – you are free from the law to live in grace – but we don't want that – that is way too much freedom for our comfort, we want to have the security of rules and the law – we want someone else to tell us what we can and can't do and what we should and shouldn't do. We don't want to be responsible for making those decisions for ourselves--we don't trust that much freedom or that much grace, we want to hedge our bets.

I freely grant that in our society traffic, criminal and civil laws are a necessity – but in our spiritual life we who accept Christ as Savior live free by grace. Everyone one of you right now wants to disagree with me – there have to be rules you say – I say again, no, read the Scriptures – you are free. Maybe that is what Paul meant when he said we should live out our salvation with fear and trembling. Phil 2.12

But Jesus gave us commandments, you say – well, I can understand why you say that – the English translations of the Bible put it that way – but let's

talk about that for moment. The word 'commandment' as we understand it was never intended to be part of God's message. In fact the word 'commandment' was not used in the Bible until the 1500s when the Geneva Bible was published, 51 years before the King James Version. The Geneva Bible was translated from the Greek and a Latin translation dating to 382 called the Vulgate – the Hebrew texts were not consulted.

In the Hebrew scriptures what Moses brought down from atop Mount Sinai are called *Asereth ha-D'bhārîm*, and in Rabbinical writings *Asereth ha-Dibroth*, both of which translates to "the ten words", or "the ten sayings"; and they are just that – there is no Thou Shalt Not in the Hebrew.

The New Testament Greek *entellō* should also be translated as 'teaching' or 'words'. Both the Hebrew and the Greek were translated into the Latin version of the Bible as *mandatum*. And in the Geneva Bible *mandatum* is translated as 'commandment'.

But, according to the dictionary a mandate is, "an authorization or permission to act in a particular way". There is nothing negative in that – it is a positive description of what should be. Beginning with the Geneva Bible in the 1500s mandate has been translated as 'commandment'. And the word 'commandment' came into our Bible vocabulary, to be repeated in almost every version ever since.

But the word 'commandment' has negative connotations for us – we hear commandment as 'thou shalt not and if you do, you're in for it' or as an order 'love with all your heart, or else'. But that is not their intent.

A mandate is, "an authorization or permission to act in a particular way". "Love one another as I have loved you" – you have my permission to pass my love on. "Forgive those who trespass against you" – you have my authorization to grant forgiveness.

You see, there is no law here – we are saved by grace, thanks be to God, and we are invited into a love relationship with Jesus, we have the privilege of living up to him, and we have the freedom of not living up to him if that's what we choose to do.

Realistically we're stuck with the word *commandment*, it has entered our culture and our vocabulary, we're not going to be able to change it—but maybe we can change the way we think about it—not as a negative law or rule (thou shalt not), but as a positive description of what we are supposed to become. Like the Codes of Conduct for the Boy Scouts and the Chin Mu Kwan Federation—like them, the Ten 'Commandments' and the 'commandments' given to us by Jesus are a positive description of how God's people, followers of Jesus, should be. They are the word, the image, the vision of who we are supposed to be.

You know, if you put Jesus and commandments into Google or some other search engine you will find that every preacher who knows how has posted a list of the 'commandments' of Jesus—the things you have to do if you are going to be a Christian. None of the lists match each other and all of them miss the point—they are setting out a 'new' set of laws— A new set of 'thou shalt not and if you do, you better watch out' or 'do this or else'. And if you fall into that trap, you will be putting yourself under the law again and you will live with your guilt because no one can live up to the law, no one.

Jesus said, according to the English translations of the Scripture, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" — the message is 'if you love me you will keep my words, if you love me you will live as I have lived, if you love me you will live as I have taught you to, if you love me you will try to live up to what I expect of you', if you love me you will allow me to make you into what I want you to be.

If we are saved by God's grace and justified by our faith, and if there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation or to get a better mansion in heaven, then how are we to live out this new life we have been given? Should we just go on trying to be good day by day— Lord deliver us! Talk about an exercise in futility! I don't know about you but the harder I try to be good and do the right thing, the worse I mess things up.

Jesus has given us a commandment, a mandate, an image, a word, a vision to live up to—it is not a commandment we keep to earn our salvation, but

it is a commandment that encourages us to live up to what he expects of us and an invitation to live out a joyous privilege, yes, a privilege. If I think it is a privilege to put on my uniform and hang out with other Scouters; if I think it is a privilege to tie on my belt and hang out with other Master Instructors; then what a privilege it is to hang out with you folks, my brothers and sisters in Christ and know that I am a member of the family of God. What a privilege it is to be allowed to love one another as He has loved us. And what a relief it is to know that if I just quit trying to control things, he will make me into what he wants me to be – I may go kicking and screaming, but he will succeed.

And so, I guess, the question for today is ‘how are we living?’ Are we fearfully trying to remember all the rules and tip-toeing around life in fear of breaking one of them? Are we carrying a crushing burden of guilt for things in the past or the present? Or are we joyfully moving along living free by grace while living up to the vision, the image, the words Jesus has given us, as best we can?

And we can do that joyfully because it doesn’t matter if we mess up – Jesus knows we aren’t perfect, he knows we aren’t going to measure up all the time, in fact he knows we’re not going to measure up most of the time, which is why when he is talking to his disciples in the Upper Room he says to them, “If you love me, you will keep my *entellow* (my teachings, my words).” And in his very next breath he says ‘Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever. ..’ (John 14.15 NET paraphrased). Another Helper – not just Jesus helping me be who I should be, but also the Holy Spirit. If they are with me why am I be fearful about life?

You see, it means that

1. with all my failures, anybody else have any failures?
2. with all of my anger, anybody else here ever get angry?
3. with all of my irritability, anybody else here ever get irritable?
4. with all of my lust, anybody else, well, I’ll let that one be
5. with all my brokenness,
6. with all of my dysfunctions,
7. with all of my stupidity, begin to get the point?

With all of that, with all my imperfect humanness, I am loved by God more than I will ever be able to comprehend. And all I want to do is just keep on keeping on living up to what he expects of me as best I can-- living up to the vision of life shown to us most fully in Jesus Christ. And, thank God, he does not keep score on how well I do that. He only takes note of my effort – not the effort of my doing the right thing – but the effort of my being--being open to God that he might form me. God did not create us as human doings – he created us as human beings. It is not in our doing, it is our being open to him so that he can make us into what he wants us to be.

We are meant to live as free people, unafraid to live fully, to be the people God intended for us to be.

Recently a dear friend in the Florida congregation came to me and said, Pastor, I don't keep all his commandments because I can't, I try but I just can't--does this mean I don't love him?? But that question is the way of the law – not the way of grace. You and I are not the first persons to live with this shadow of doubt – John Wesley himself for a good portion of his life was not certain that the gospel he preached applied to him because he knew his sin.

Jesus did not come to us as a teacher to lay down new lessons on how to live – he did not come to replace the old law with a new set of commandments – he was not a law-giver or a promulgator of rules. When we think of him that way we misunderstand the very essence of the Incarnation. Jesus is not a new law giver, nor is he just a teacher – he is a Savior – he does not expect us to do the work of trying to live up to what we think he expects of us – he came to transform us – to make us into what he want us to be. When we truly accept him as Savior, he will place in us the Spirit that governed him – he will give us the same Holy Spirit which governed his conduct and his life.

And when it happens that we do not measure up to the standard demonstrated to us in Jesus – when we don't measure up and it will happen, every day-- and the little voice in your head starts whispering that you're not good enough, leading you to doubt your salvation – know that is Satan's voice. He is the accuser and he is a liar. Order him out of your presence, turn your face to God and know – know this my friends--when we don't measure up, God will make up the difference in us – and he will, he said so and I believe him – that is what grace is all about.

What had been 'law' has now become in Jesus a 'vision of what can be' – a vision of a goal toward which God will grow us if we let him. I want to live up to that vision – not because it is my duty, it's not, not because my salvation depends on it, it doesn't, not because I have to, I don't. I want to live up to that vision because it is a privilege to be allowed to – it is a privilege to join the company of the disciples – those who are children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

We can't do it by ourselves – we already know that--and living by grace alone frightens the daylights out of many people – living by grace alone frightens some people to the point they let go of Jesus and hurry to find some rules and laws to make them feel safe, comfortable – and if they can't find any, they'll make some up – but that safety and comfort is a fleeting illusion because sooner or later they are left with only their guilt because they can't keep those laws either. And trying to console yourself with the thought that all in all you're not doing too bad is thin comfort. My heart breaks for those who get all caught up in the legalism, they are missing out on a wonderful, joyous, life.

Living by grace alone, trusting only in the Lord and not in our wealth or institutions or governments or our good behavior is a pretty scary proposition when you first think about it. The doing of it feels risky in itself, and it is made even more difficult by the culture that surrounds us. Have you heard the latest survey results on the number of Americans who do not have a religious belief or church affiliation? – their numbers are growing.

Will I shock you if I suggest that one big cause of atheism in the world today is you and me? When we acknowledge Jesus with our lips in here and then walk out that door and live as if he makes no difference in our lives, when we claim to be recipients of God's grace and God's love and then don't pass it on out there, when we claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit and then fail to lead the free joyous grace-filled life he has given us, when we live like that people look at us and just shake their heads. Most of us dabble in Christianity rather than abandoning ourselves to it, me included. Letting go and stepping out in faith trusting in God's grace, what a privilege, and what a challenge! But that is what he's given us.

Love the Lord your God with all that you are
Love your neighbor as yourself.
Love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Can you see the vision? Can you imagine a life where these three statements were true of every one of us, a life where we all lived up to these words? Can you feel it?

Jesus has given us the word, his words, they sit in front of us as an invitation to a life of fullness and joy, a grace filled life, a life with no threats of punishment, no law. We are forgiven, we are free, and when we don't measure up Jesus has our back – and the Holy Spirit takes up our slack.

It is as simple and as difficult as that. Christ died for you – why not live for him?

Lord, we praise you and give you thanks. Amen