

## 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Exodus 20:1-20; Psalm 19; Matthew 21:33-46; Philippians 3:4b-14.**

**Exodus 20:1-20** is, without argument, the best known and most important passage in the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments or Decalogue (the Greek translation of the Hebrew *deka logoi* or “Ten Words”) is the text for today’s Old Testament lesson.

The “Law” of Israel, which stated the essential mission of Israel and the structure to carry out that mission, was clearly the most important document of ancient Israel. It consisted of several elements. The essence of the Law is caught up in the “mission statement” of Israel, the *Shema*. “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). Jesus, in responding to the question, “Which commandment is the first of all?” did not choose any of the Ten but rather quoted the Shema, and then added to it, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mt. 22:37-39), Mk. 12:30-31, Lk. 10:27), quoting Leviticus 19:18. In the Matthew account, Jesus goes on to declare, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt. 22:40).

These are the two great commandments upon which the entire Hebrew Law is based. We are to love Yahweh our God with the entirety of our being. And we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But what is significant about these commandments, when read in their original context, is that they are every bit as much corporate as they are individual. In other words, each Israelite is called by God to center his life in the love of Yahweh and of his or her neighbor. But also the nation itself is to be centered in the love of and commitment to Yahweh, as well as comparable love of all its neighbor nations, as well. The Shema is, after all, addressed not to Israelites, but to the nation itself (“hear, *O Israel*”). Thus, this passage is as much a statement of foreign policy and the priorities of the nation as it is of individual response!

But how is a nation to place God at the center of its political, economic and religious life? And how is a nation to act out that love by the very way it treats the nations around it and works for justice in its own land? That question is answered in a most unique way in the Law.

We think of the Ten Commandments as a “stand-alone” document. But, in reality, it is not. The Ten Commandments are recited twice in scripture (Exodus 20:1-17, Deut. 5:6-21). In today’s Old Testament lesson, it is set within the context of a larger book which is called “the Book of the Covenant” (Exodus 19-24). The Ten Commandments play the central role in that book, but what precedes it and follows it is crucial to understanding the task the Decalogue was designed to accomplish.

In the Preamble of the Book of the Covenant, its author presents how Israel is to live its life, placing God at the center of its political, economic and religious life, and how it is to “love its neighbor nations as it loves itself”. That preamble sets the entire context for the Ten Commandments and, consequently, the Law created to implement those ten commands in both the everyday life of the people and the nation’s political, economic and religious structure. So, in order to examine that preamble, we need to set the historical context.

After the final defeat of Pharaoh and of Egypt at the Reed Sea, the emancipated slaves of Israel knew that their next major order of business was to meet with the God who had rescued them from certain annihilation. Moses had earlier said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness” (5:1). The Israelites now broke camp and followed Moses out into the desert, toward Mount Sinai. There, they were to worship God and learn from Yahweh what they were next to do. So they now set forth to Mount Sinai.

Three months later, they arrived at the famed mountain. Their journey of three months had not been smooth, for there had been discord, conflict and even rebellion on the way. But now the former slaves had arrived at the sacred mountain where Moses had first met God at the burning bush. The people stood before the mountain, awed not only at its great height, but the clouds that belched forth from it, the roar and the fire that symbolized God’s presence there. Moses climbed the mountain to meet with God, while the people stood in fear and trembling below!

As God had met with Moses earlier on that mountain, so Yahweh met once again with Moses. And there he made a treaty with Moses – ten commands that were destined to become the primary rules upon which Israel would build its life, its nation and its religion together. But within the context of those Ten Commandments, God also issued a call to Israel. And that day, God made as binding a covenant with Israel as he had previously made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Throughout its subsequent history, Israel would look back to that event at Mount Sinai as the formative event of its nation. In the covenant begun there, Israel found itself as a faith-community, a people who could not understand themselves apart from the covenant to which they were committed. Here is the story of the creation of that “Book of the Covenant” as Israel told it.

The Book of the Covenant begins with God’s call to Israel. In his initial encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai, God declared, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod. 19:4). This was the first of an uncounted number of times in the Old Testament in which God reminded Israel of what he had done for them. The reason was plain: God’s covenant with Israel was built upon God’s deliverance and liberation (salvation) of them. Because God had freed them from Egyptian tyranny and had provided for them as they traveled the desert, he now expected Israel to center their national and individual life in Yahweh through loving him and obeying him.

After reminding Israel of what he had done, Yahweh issued his call to the nation. “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (19:5-6a).

Two important insights are presented here in the Exodus 19 account of God’s call to Israel. First, *God selected one nation, Israel, to be his people* – to be his representatives before the world. This choice was an arbitrary act of God’s grace, for Israel had done nothing to deserve selection. In fact, if anything, Israel’s actions ought to have dissuaded God. But such actions had not so dissuaded God. God had chosen them. And God had chosen them precisely because they were the poorest and weakest nation at that time on the face of the earth. He chose “what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things

that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (I Cor. 1:27b-29).

In reviewing the covenant made between God and Israel, the author of Deuteronomy said it best when he wrote, “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:7-8).

Second, *God had selected and called Israel to be a ‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’*. They had been called to center both their national life and their individual lives in the love of Yahweh and the love of their individual and corporate neighbors. But how were they to live out that love of God and humanity? They were to live that out by becoming a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”.

What did that mean – to be called to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? What it meant was that Yahweh had called Israel to a specific responsibility, a definite “job” – that of being priests. Whether they were conducting business with each other or trading with the nations of the world, whether they were adjudicating quarrels within families or working for national justice for the poor among them, whether they were dealing with children ostracized by other children or whether they were dealing with the immigrant from another country who was living among them, they were to act as priests. By designating all Israel as a holy nation of priests, Yahweh had revealed the essence of their call as a people. That call was involving both special privilege and heavy responsibility. Being called to a national priesthood meant that they had been selected as the intermediary between God and humankind; that was the “special privilege”. But it bore “heavy responsibility” as well, for the fate of the world rested on their obedience of leading the world (through their service of God and humankind) back to God!

When Moses’ descended from Mount Sinai for the first time, he brought to the people of Israel this call from God. What would the people now do? The author of Exodus tells us, “The people all answered as one, ‘Everything that Yahweh has spoken we will do’. When Moses had told the words of the people to Yahweh, Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow.’” (19:8, 9b-10). So Moses consecrated the people, and God made the covenant with them to become a nation of priests and a holy nation (19:16-25). It was in the light of this call to the people from God and their consequent acceptance of that call that God then gave to Moses the Ten Commandments.

The people had committed themselves to embrace God’s call for them to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”. They would become intermediaries between God and humanity through their living out a national life of being totally centered in Yahweh and in the love of their neighbor. But how was such priestly centering in Yahweh and loving of neighbor to be concretely lived out in everyday national and individual life? It was the responsibility of the Ten Commandments to summarize how being “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” was to be lived out.

The Ten Commandments was a treaty – a treaty between God and Israel, by which God placed before Israel his expectations if they were to truly live out being “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” through loving God and neighbor. We are all aware that the Ten Commandments were carved onto two tablets. It is these two tablets that help us to understand the treaty made between God and Israel that would result in the building of a Godly nation and people. Both tablets begin with a preamble: “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”.

### **Tablet One: Commandments on What It Means to Love God:**

1. “You shall have no other gods before me.”
2. “You shall not make for yourself an idol”.
3. “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God”.
4. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

The first tablet lays out Israel’s obligations to Yahweh. They are four obligations, and by their obedience, indicate that the person or nation so obeying them truly lives out their confession of love for Yahweh (“Don’t tell me that you love me; show me!”). The first commandment is not monotheistic; it assumes there are other gods (every nation, every people and every territory had its own god). The first commandment is requiring Israel to worship only Yahweh, and to thus reject all other gods. No god, no person, no national idol, no lust for power, wealth or influence was to be embraced at all. Life was to be fixated upon Yahweh – and Yahweh alone!

The second commandment naturally evolved from the first. If Yahweh – and Yahweh alone – was to be the center of your life and faith, then you are not to depend upon the creation and veneration of images to remind you of that god. And that included Yahweh. Just as you were to have no images of Ba’al or Amon-Re or Marduk in your home or at your worship shrine, so you were to have no image of Yahweh. Why? Because Israel was to concentrate upon the covenant made between them and Yahweh, and imageless worship would free you from being tempted or seduced by that image and would center you on carrying out the covenantal agreement between you and God. Therefore, live simply, do not become ostentatious, do not seek to impress those around you; instead, center on Yahweh.

The third commandment does not so much deal with cursing (although it doesn’t negate that) as it does with making a binding oath using God’s name. As Jesus later said, in interpreting this commandment, “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:7).

The fourth commandment structures and consecrates time, not as a seemingly undifferentiated sequence of days between our birth and our death, but as God-impregnated time that must be organized with days specifically dedicated to God (though all days are sacred) and set aside as holy. On those days, the life of every family, tribe, city and nation must cease its normal commerce in order for rest, relaxation, reflection and the religious service of God to occur. Unless time is thus organized and set apart, the nation will not have any time dedicated for God at all and thus will quickly slip into disobeying the first, second and third commandments.

### **Tablet Two: Commandments on What It Means to Love the Neighbor:**

5. "Honor your father and your mother."
6. "You shall not murder."
7. "You shall not commit adultery."
8. "You shall not steal."
9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."
10. "You shall not covet anything or anyone who is your neighbors."

The remaining six commandments deal with Israel's relationships with "the neighbor" that are the natural consequence of a national or individual existence centered in loving Yahweh. The way you as an individual or as a society bear witness to your authentic relationship with God will be the way you choose to treat one another in that society or across societies. To honor parents, to not murder, to not commit adultery, to not steal, to not bear false witness and to not covet are all natural applications of a people's love for God that builds a sound society.

The Ten Commandments took the form of a treaty between God and Israel, agreed to by both parties as the acting out of the covenant made between them. As such, the Ten Commandments bears marked similarity to a "suzerainty treaty" popular throughout the Middle East in the second millennium BCE.

A "suzerainty treaty" was used between a suzerain (e.g., a king, an overlord) and his vassals. A suzerainty treaty was made in the first person (I – you), and began by indicating the benevolent acts of the king toward the vassal in past years. The king then claimed allegiance and obedience because of his past benevolence. After receiving the vassal's allegiance, the king stated the stipulations, which normally were: 1) the vassal was to have relations with no other king; 2) he was not to engage in any internal civil war, but was to be at peace with his fellow vassals; and 3) the treaty was to be deposited in the temple of the vassal, there to be used for periodic public readings. Following these stipulations, the suzerain and vassal invoked the deities of heaven and earth to witness the treaty, and then the king pronounced the curses which would come to the vassal if the treaty were broken, and the blessings which would come if it were kept.

Notice the remarkable similarity between the suzerainty treaties and the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are written in first person; they present the benevolent acts of the great king toward Israel (Ex. 20:2); they demand obedience (20:3). The Commandments place upon the Israelites the stipulations of no entangling alliances with other gods (20:3-6), no seditious acts (20:7), and the periodic appearance of each Israelite in God's court – the tabernacle (20:8-11). They require loyalty and responsible attitudes toward the other vassals (20:12-17). Finally, they include the pronouncements of curses and blessings (20:5-6, 18-21).

If the Ten Commandments were a suzerainty treaty (and many biblical scholars now believe that they were), they can be understood more completely. The Ten Commandments were a treaty made between God and his people. They were meant to be regulative instructions which 1) aided the Israelites in recognizing their obligation to the sovereign God, and 2) structured only that portion of their relationship to each other and to other nations that affected the plans of Yahweh. That the Ten Commandments were negative commandments ("You shall not . . .") was significant, since this language forbade action in one area while leaving all other areas free: positive law would have forbidden action in all areas but one.

Because the Israelites saw the Ten Commandments as a suzerainty treaty, they accepted the laws as regulative (i.e., as teachings of life and faith). This view gave the people a dynamic, not legalistic understanding of their freedom and responsibility as “priests” of Yahweh. They were the servants of their ruler; love for God was the only factor which motivated love and responsible action toward their personal neighbors and toward Israel’s national neighbors. It was up to the individual to keep the commandments; although they were all members of God’s people, each individual felt a personal responsibility to God to keep the commandments. It was also up to the community to keep the commandments; the Decalogue was the standard by which Israel was to regulate its relationships with other nations.

The Ten Commandments, therefore, were meant to be a model for the new lifestyle under which the Israelites were to live. As the newly-rescued (“saved”) people of God, the Israelites were to build a new national and personal life, symbolized in their covenant with God. The Ten Commandments were a listing of those ten elements at work in any society which tend to destroy that society. If the Israelites were to murder, commit adultery, or covet, if they were to make Yahweh and his love secondary in their daily lives, their society would crumble. If, on the other hand, the Israelites obeyed God and treated other persons as the Ten Commandments outlined, they would be well on their way to becoming a kingdom of Yahweh’s priests in the world. By following their suzerainty treaty in both national and personal life, the Israelites would become a little “garden of Eden” in the midst of the wickedness and injustice of the rest of the world. As others saw how Israel lived in obedience to the one, true God and their service of humankind, they would also turn to Yahweh – and the world would become what God had created it to be!

The remainder of the Book of the Covenant (20:22-24:8) was designed as a further elaboration of the Ten Commandments, becoming more specific about how those commandments would be applied (for example) to what constituted “murder” and what did not (21:12-27), how was God to be appropriately worshipped (20:22-26; 23:14-19; 24:1-8), the owning and treatment of slaves (21:1-11), laws concerning property (21:28-36), laws of restitution (22:1-15), social and religious laws (22:16-31), the guarantees of justice for all people – peasants as well as princes (23:1-9), the sharing of wealth and elimination of poverty (23:10-19), and God’s promise to bring Israel into the Promised Land (23:20-33).

Likewise, the later document called the “Law” went beyond the Book of the Covenant to apply the Ten Commandments to the full breadth of Israelite political, economic and religious life (Exodus 24:9-31:18; 34:1-35:29; 36:8-40:38; all of Leviticus and all of Numbers). Finally, the book of Deuteronomy was the final recitation and systematizing of the Law (the closest Israel ever came to a constitution). Also built around the Ten Commandments (Deut. 4:44-5:21), the book of Deuteronomy draws up the formal political, economic and religious systems of Israel and how they were to function in order to enable the nation to live out at all levels of its existence from the individual to the national the two great commandments to love God and to love neighbor as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. As such, Deuteronomy was the apex of the Law, building the structures and systems of the nation at every level around the values that came forth from God’s meeting with Moses and the people at Mount Sinai.

In essence, the decisions made by Israel at Mount Sinai set Israel on a course from which they could later never fully free themselves. At Mount Sinai, Israel made the decision to build a nation, not on the ways of Pharaoh but on the ways of Yahweh. No matter how individual leaders of Israel or even the nation as a whole sought to re-embrace the ways of Pharaoh in their lust to be “like all the other nations of the world”, they could not – for the corporate memory and the constant pressure of prophets reminded them of the unique directions in which that nation had decided to move. In responding to God’s call to build a nation of priests, in the making of a covenant between themselves and God, and in their swearing of allegiance to follow the Ten Commandments, Israel had decided on a profoundly different direction for building a nation.

The action of the Israelites in embracing the Ten Commandments released upon the world a new social imagination that would never again be able to be blocked out. That new social imagination now had the liturgics to constantly keep re-stimulating that imagination in every new Israelite generation (its worship), the political and economic structure and systems that would prize all social institutions treating all its people justly, sharing wealth and bearing a common commitment to the elimination of poverty anywhere in its nation. And most profoundly of all, it moved beyond ideals to the creation of actual legislative vehicles to guarantee that the world as God would want it to be would continue. Those legislative vehicles included Sabbatical Years that freed slaves, forgave debts and revived land (Deut. 15:1-11), Jubilees that redistributed wealth (Lev. 25:8-55), kings who read and abided by Torah (Deut. 17:14-20), judges who refused to be bribed (16:18-20; 17:8-13), cities of refuge to limit violence and guarantee fair trials (19:1-10), no interest to be charged on loans (23:19-20), and immediate payment of wages to avoid exploitive use of that money by employers (24:14-15) (to name a few).

Thus, at Mount Sinai, Israel covenanted with Yahweh to eschew for its future the politics of unilateral power and oppression, the economics of greed and exploitation and a religion of domination that typified the reign of every Pharaoh. Rather, through the Ten Commandments, Israel embraced a society as God created it to be – a world of political justice for all people no matter who they might be, economic equity for all, the elimination of poverty throughout that society, the care and even celebration of their environment, and the centering of all of that nation’s life in a God who loves and makes covenant with God’s people – he who “causes to be what is caused to be”. And that is the importance of the Ten Commandments!

**Psalm 19** deals with two ways that God communicates and interacts with us. The first is through creation. The second is through his Word (the Law). First, God reveals himself through creation.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (19:1-4).

It is as if the creation has a voice that speaks to us, the Psalmist writes. The created order is so vast and so overwhelming, its very existence speaks to us of a Creator who is powerful enough to

create such beauty and ordered enough to create such order (incidentally, astronomers today report that the cosmos is not silent simply because of its vast space; instead, stars produce an immense amount of noise, as each solar flare and explosion erupts with ear-shattering noise).

But God also speaks to us through his written Word – to the Jews, it is the Law through which God speaks. To the Christian, it is the scripture themselves.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (19:7-9).

God’s word revives our spirit; God’s teachings make us wise; God’s truths teach us rightly and cause us to rejoice; God’s expectations enlighten and order our lives. Standing in awe before God makes us centered in him and pure. Thus, relationship with God makes us “true and righteous altogether”.

It is out of the keen awareness of the power, majesty and love of God revealed to us both by creation and the Law that we inevitably have two responses.

First is the awareness of our sin. An awareness of God’s power and love makes us immediately aware of how far short of his glory we fall. The response of Isaiah the Prophet to the vision of Yahweh that he had in the Temple was his confession, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). Thus, this psalmist reacts in the very same way.

“But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression” (vss. 12-13).

The Psalmist is made aware of his own sinfulness and his own limitations. Therefore, he confesses his sin – and particularly “hidden faults”, sins of omission as well as commission. But he is also aware of how easily he is tempted to follow others who do not stand in awe before God – the “insolent”. So he further prays that God will protect him from his own tendency to not stand strongly for what he believes.

But the Psalmist’s second response is one of praise. He centers his soul upon the centering of his entire life in God. And he does so in one of the most beautiful benedictions that appears in scripture.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (vs. 14).

**Matthew 21:33-46** is the third of three stories or actions conducted by Jesus in order to confront the Jewish priestly elite who perceive Jesus as a significant threat to their maintenance of



political, economic and religious power. Their objective is not simply to defeat or discredit him; their objective is to destroy him. And he has exposed their intentions with his handling of their questioning of his authority and his parable of the two sons. Now, in this final story of this pericope, Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants of a vineyard, Jesus administers the *coup de grace* to these elite priests that fully exposes them before the people, to each other and to their own souls for the power-hungry, corrupt and dominating people that they are.

Jesus begins, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son'. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time" (21:33-41).

This story, of all Jesus' parables, comes closest to being an allegory. A parable, of course, is a fictitious story that illustrates a single point (usually a moral attitude or a religious principle). An allegory, on the other hand, is a story in which each figure, place or person in the story represents or symbolizes something else. Thus, in this parable, it is clear that the owner of the vineyard is God and the vineyard is Israel (this understanding is strengthened by the fact that the common metaphor for Israel used throughout the Old Testament was that of vineyard [e.g., Isa 5:1-7; Jer. 12:1-13; Micah 1:2-7]).

The tenants are those in authority in Israel – the Jerusalem clerical elite, the land-owners and the Pharisees and Sadducees. They are tenants of the land, not owners, because in Israel the Law allowed no one to be a true owner (the land belonged to Yahweh – Psalm 50) because only God is the owner. Therefore, an apparent "owner" was, in reality, one who held the land in trust for God, caring for it and making it productive as if it were his own (the entire Jubilee and Sabbatical Years laws were built on this premise). Finally, the slaves are the prophets, the "truth-tellers" down the centuries calling the political, economic and religious systems to accountability to the Law. And the son, obviously, is Jesus himself.

The story is simple enough. The owner of the vineyard creates it, plants it, fences it and guards it. He has invested considerable money and time into its creation. To tend the vineyard and to make it financially productive, he rents it to tenants who will care for it, make a profit off it, and return a portion of that profit to the owner. Then, the owner goes away on a trip.

During the owner's absence, the tenants refuse to make payment to the owner, plotting instead to take over the vineyard. When the owner sends his employed representatives to the vineyard to demand the owner's just reimbursement, they beat, kill and stone them. As a final act, the owner sends his son as his personal representative, but they seize his son and kill him. What, then, should be the fate of such dishonest tenants? The answer is obvious. The owner should have

them arrested, prosecuted to the full extent of the law, found guilty, executed, and then he will lease the vineyard to others. And that is exactly what he does!

What strikes us 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans as strange in this parable is the treatment of the slaves and son by the tenants. Why would the owner send these representatives? And what would the tenants hope to gain by such harsh action? But that response indicates we do not understand the Jewish law of the first century A.D.

The civil code of Israel required that an owner be accessible to the land that his tenants were tending. It was expected that he or his chosen representative would collect the rentals, would demand his agreed-upon share of the harvest, would maintain the repair of the vineyard, and would be available to settle any disputes. If the owner or his designated representative would absent themselves from the vineyard for three successive harvests, then those who were its tenants could make legal claim to and gain ownership of the property. The crime of the tenants in this parable told by Jesus (besides killing the owner's representatives) was that when the owner would send representatives to renew his claim upon the vineyard, the tenants would kill each representative and then insist he had never arrived. Therefore, they could contend that, for three successive harvests, the owner and his representatives had made no contact with them and that, therefore, they were justified in making legal claim to that property.

Thus cheated, what could the owner do? There was only one thing he could do (besides returning from the far country himself) to maintain his ownership of the vineyard. In the fourth year of successive harvests, he could send his son! The fourth year was crucial, because it was the last chance the owner had to reassert his claim upon the vineyard. If the courts received no claim from the owner, they would declare his ownership null-and-void and title to the vineyard would transfer over to the claimants, who were the vineyard's tenants. But that representation could no longer be made by household bureaucrats (the slaves). It could only be made by the eldest son (or the owner himself), who was required to go by law to the vineyard with a legal witness and reclaim ownership from the tenants. This was exactly the process Jesus was describing in this parable. And the shocking element of the parable to its first-century listeners was not that the owner sent slaves and then his son (that was to be expected), but that the tenants killed these representatives of the owner and then sought to cover up their crime. There was the crime of murder in this situation, of course. But the shocking crime lay in the tenants insisting that there had been no contact from the owner, while the owner was doing everything both possible and legally to maintain his contact.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the parable illustrated a total betrayal of trust by Israel's leadership upon which the entire legal code of Israel was based. And this betrayal, in Jesus' parable, was being done by the religious, political and economic leaders of the nation as they sought to use the Law in order to overthrow Yahweh (Israel's owner) and claim the nation for their own! It was the most fierce and awesome accusation of evil intent that it was possible for Jesus to make against Israel's elite!

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<sup>1</sup> Derrett, J.D.M., *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), pp. 286-312; Newell, J. and Newell, R., "Parable of the Wicked Tenants", *Novum Testamentum*, 1972), Vol. 14, pp. 226-237; Herzog, William R. II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 98-113.

Israel's religious leaders must have stood there, utterly stunned by what Jesus had just said – and said publicly. It could not have been worse! And then it did, indeed, get worse!

“Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing and it is amazing in our eyes?’ Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls”” (vss. 42-44).

No wonder Israel's elite react as they do. “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet” (vss. 45-46)!

Jesus' words to Israel's political, economic and religious leaders, publicly spoken before the people, could not have been worse (from the elite's perspective). There was no way to mitigate them. Here was Israel's most respected and revered prophet and religious leader publicly exposing the nation's political, economic and religious elite for what they were – tenants who would use any means (including killing the Son of God) to maintain their power, wealth and control of Israel. And this they would do by covering over it all with beautiful religious talk!

In those closing words, Jesus tells both Israel's leaders and the public that God has taken leadership of God's empire away from Israel's established leaders. They have been banished by God! They are no longer legitimate leaders to be obeyed or respected. They are to be cast out! For God has replaced them. And God has replaced them through God's “stone”, the Son whom the tenants sought to kill. Now that “stone” is meant to become the “cornerstone” upon which a new temple of God, God's new empire, will be built. “This is the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes!”

Jesus is here clearly preaching revolution! There is simply no other way to interpret these words. The author Matthew is telling us this story at a significant transition point in his story about Jesus – when Jesus moves from seeking the systems' repentance to condemning them to be “broken to pieces”, stating that God will create a new kingdom – a kingdom “given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom”. These are Israel's peasants who, like the first son, seem not to pay attention to the rituals of the temple, but who do the will of the Son by working for justice, equity and Godly relationships in the world!

No wonder Israel's leaders “wanted to arrest Jesus” and, in fact, to execute him. But they waited for a moment when he would be alone and unguarded, for they feared a rebellion of the people! They would wait for a more “opportune season”! So they began their death watch.

**Philippians 3:4b-14** was probably the most formative biblical passage for me in my early Christian life and ministry. It played that role because it articulated so clearly to me what I wanted my primary priorities to be.

This scripture divides easily into three parts. The first part deals with Paul's statement of his credentials before becoming a Christian.

Paul begins, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (3:4b-6).

Paul reminds his audience that he was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews". One could not be more Hebrew than was Paul!

Paul makes two assertions about who he once was. The first assertion was to the purity of his lineage. He was "circumcised on the eighth day". That is, he was circumcised as the sign-in-his-flesh that he was authentically a Jew, and that sign-in-his-flesh occurred on the ceremonial day required by the law (Leviticus 12:3). He was not, in other words, a proselyte or convert lately come to Judaism. Further, he was "a member of the people of Israel" or of the race of Israel. He even knew to which of the twelve tribes he belonged – the tribe of Benjamin. Thus, he belonged to the elite of Israel, of the nation's aristocracy, for it was the forebear of this tribe – Benjamin, who was the favorite of the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 35:17-18), it was this tribe that gave Israel its first king, it was the only tribe to remain faithful to the Temple and to the tribe of Judah when it refused to break from the kingdom of David at the time of the great rebellion against Solomon's son (I Kings 12:21), and it was the tribe that always led Israel into battle (Judges 5:14; Hosea 5:8).

Paul further proves the purity of his lineage that he was "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" – that is, one who, though he grew up in a Gentile city (Tarsus), continued to speak Hebrew in his home and synagogue (although he spoke Greek in his everyday activities in Tarsus) and continued to assiduously maintain the traditions of Israel and Yahweh worship in his exile. Thus, Paul presents himself as having a pure and thoroughly-Jewish lineage.

The second assertion was to the purity of his intent. It was not only by his lineage that Paul was among the Hebrew aristocracy; he also proved himself Hebrew by his actions. That is the double meaning that is caught up in his expression, "I was a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents". What were those actions?

"As to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless". Paul presents three indicators of his actions that demonstrate how much he was committed to the Hebrew faith. He was, first of all, a Pharisee. The word "Pharisee" means "the separated one". A Pharisee was a Hebrew who so embraced Judaism that he had separated himself from actions, ideas and commitments that were not in conformity with the Jewish Law. By stating that he was a Pharisee, Paul was stated that he had not only retained his ancestral religion, but that he had devoted his entire life to its observance. He was a student of the Law, a scholar of the faith who practiced what he preached.

"As to zeal, a persecutor of the church". There was nothing more important to a Jew than for others to perceive him as a zealous person, single minded in his commitment to the Law (Psalm

69:9). The total commitment of Paul to Judaism was indicated by the fact that he persecuted the church, for to a Jew the Christian church was the worst abomination. The church was “Judaism gone awry” because the Christians had abandoned their original commitment to the Hebrew faith for the sake of a bastardized version of it.

Finally, Paul saw himself as being “blameless” in his acting out of the Law. The Greek word translated “blameless” is the word *amemptos* which comes from the verb *memphesthai* which means “to blame for sins of omission”. In other words, what Paul is declaring here is that there was no requirement of the Law that he had not obeyed. He was scrupulous in the keeping of the Law.

Thus, with this statement, Paul has demonstrated that, as a Jew, he was both pure in his lineage and faithful in his application of the Law. Both his life and his actions were as spotlessly Jewish as one could be. He was, indeed, a “Hebrew of the Hebrews”! But then, he continues on in this Epistle lesson for this Sunday.

“But whatever gain I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (vss. 7-11).

There is no polite way to translate what Paul actually writes here! Instead, he reverts to the coarsest Greek in order to communicate the depths of his convictions. All that he gained in his life by his former embrace of heritage, all that he had worked so hard to achieve as a Jew, he now counted as “rubbish”. The Greek word Paul uses here, *skubala* that is politely translated “rubbish” is actually the most common and coarse Greek word for “excrement”. Next to coming to experience Christ as his Savior and Lord, all that Paul had gained and achieved in life as a Jew was as defecation!

None of what the Hebrew world counted as credentials had earned him any credit before God, Paul had discovered. If anything, such a heritage and actions had gotten in the way of his “knowing Christ”. It was these great “riches” of being a Jew that had gotten in Paul’s way, making it more difficult for him to enter God’s kingdom; this was his “camel” that could not get through the “eye of a needle” (Matt. 19:24). What is truly important to a Christian, Paul is proclaiming, is not his credentials, heritage or accomplishments, but gaining Christ through a response of faith to him. “(May I) be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own . . . but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (3:9). Then, comes Paul’s greatest wish:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11).

Paul's primary objective in life was not to be a faithful and obedient Jew. Even greater as a Christian Jew, his primary objective was not to win the Gentile world to Christ nor to plant churches throughout the Roman empire nor to create a theology that would set Christianity's future. All of these would be falling back into the trap of good works. Paul's one objective was to know Christ – to grow in his relationship with Christ, to identify with him in his sufferings, to enter into and to take on himself some of the death experience of Christ, so that he might experience the magnitude, joy and power of Christ's resurrection. Paul wanted to be even more absorbed into the Christ life, and thus to experience and reflect the Christ-life in his presence, practice, proclamation and prayer.

Paul now moves to the third portion of the Epistle lesson for the 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. He wrote, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (vss. 12-14).

In verse 10, Paul has just said that what he wants for his life is not so much to do things *for* Christ as it is to deepen his relationship and fellowship *with* Christ. He has indicated the elements of that relationship – to share in Christ's sufferings for the world, to experience for his own life some of the death of Christ and its sacrifice for sin, and thus in this way to experience something of the victory of Christ's resurrection, as well. Paul's longing is similar to the prayer of the young Bob Pierce out of which he founded the world's largest humanitarian organization, World Vision, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God!"

Now, Paul goes on to confess "It isn't that I have somehow already come to know Christ so much more profoundly than has anyone else. I haven't. But what I claim for myself is the promise of this reality. Christ Jesus has already come to know me thoroughly, for he has already grasped me and redeemed me through his suffering, death and resurrection. Therefore – because I have already been made Christ's own possession, I now want to possess him – to know him and to grasp him as he has already so clearly known and grasped me"!

Then Paul continues, "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (vss. 13-14).

Using the metaphor not of a race but of a marathon, Paul sees himself straining every muscle as he races for the finish line, not thinking of the race he has already run but fixated totally upon that goal with everything within him concentrated on the race's completion and for the prize that awaits him there, the prize "of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus".

As Paul writes these words to his beloved Church, he makes it clear that he has not spiritually arrived. He hasn't even suggested that it is possible for him to "arrive". He isn't comparing himself to anyone around him, for he is competing against himself, not others. All he is concentrated upon is to experience Christ as thoroughly as he possibly can in this life – to

experience every nuance of Christ that he can experience. And therefore, he doesn't fixate upon his past – neither his former levels of spirituality nor the ministries in which he has been privileged to participate. Nor does he concentrate upon his present actions or intentions for the church, the work he needs to do. Rather, he concentrates upon what lies before him. He is always moving out into the future with Christ. He strains forward to the experiences that lie before him. He keeps moving out towards the new, willing – always willing – to experience the next level of relationship with Christ, to undertake the next risky ministries to which God calls him. And this he does by keeping before himself his ultimate objective – “the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14b).

And so should we all!

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