

“Time After Time,” The Decalogue, and God’s Invitation to *Hesed*
A Sermon for St. John’s Episcopal Church, Minneapolis by Craig Lemming
Sunday, March 4, 2018 – The Third Sunday in Lent

When we hear the Ten Commandments today, it is easy to become cynical. In the age of Donald Trump’s presidency, our general distrust of each other’s motives is grounded in a cynical belief that hypocrisy, deceitfulness, selfishness, egoism, materialism, and ruthlessness are the hidden characteristics of all human behavior.¹ If we interpret the Ten Commandments from this cynical point of view, we are tempted to create God in our cynical image and reject the Decalogue as a meaningless list of ten rules imposed upon us by a ridiculously vain and sadistic tyrant. As a person who was raised in Socialist Zimbabwe, I realized quickly that here in “The Land of the Free” we do not like being told what we can or cannot do. This Sermon is an invitation to approach the Ten Commandments from a completely different point of view. At the risk of being denounced as a heretic, this Sermon connects the work of Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad and the work of psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm with the Ten Commandments and the timeless pop song “Time After Time” – yes, *that* smash hit from 1983 by the pop icon Cyndi Lauper.² Brace yourselves!

¹ Luis E. Navia, *Contributions in Philosophy*, vol. 58, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 58.

² <https://youtu.be/VdQY7BusJNU>.

It was a crisp, sunny, Zimbabwean morning in 1988, I was six years old, and it was the first day of school. My father drove me to school that morning and I sat in the back seat of his car in my starched school uniform, complete with the red blazer, tie, and cap of Saint Michael's Preparatory School for Catholic Boys, still pungent with that freshly dry-cleaned aroma. Terror and excitement distracted me from listening to the children's story that played on the radio for the weekday morning commute, and when Dad forgot to turn the volume down after the news report, an infectiously beautiful pop song came on as we drove through the school gates. Dad crouched down on one knee: I remember his aftershave (Old Spice), tobacco smoke (Newbury Extra Mild Cigarettes), and Dad's handsome smile beaming with pride. I don't recall exactly what Dad said, but I knew that his phone number was on the business card he had tucked into my blazer pocket, right by my heart, and that, no matter what happened – no matter how lost or frightened I would be – at the end of the day, I would find him there waiting for me. Comingled with his love language were phrases of the final refrain of that infectious song on the radio:

**If you're lost you can look—and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall I will catch you—I will be waiting
Time after time.³**

³ Rob Hyman and Cyndi Lauper, *Time After Time* Lyrics (Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 1983): <https://youtu.be/VdQY7BusJNU>.

This is the lens through which we should read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Decalogue – ten ways to find ourselves in a committed relationship with the God of *Hesed* – the God of steadfast, abiding, merciful, faithful, radical love.

As charming as my childhood story and the song “Time After Time” may be, this optimist and believer may not have won over your inner cynic. So perhaps the insights of German Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad will help.⁴ Von Rad sees the Ten Commandments as an endeavor to outline God’s whole will for us in the shortest possible form. Israel herself worked for a long time on the Decalogue before it became so universal and concise in form and content as to be capable of standing for an adequate outline of the whole will of God. To make meaning of our duties to God and to one another – honoring those who gave us life, as well as safe guarding the life, marriage, property, and honor of our neighbors – all of this must be interpreted within the context in which the Decalogue is proclaimed. God’s appeal to us is founded upon the saving act of God’s liberation of all faithful people from the slavery of Pharaoh’s oppressive Empire:

**Then God spoke these words:
I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.⁵**

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962-1965), 191-203.

⁵ Exodus 20:1-2.

In other words, God freed us from the bondage of an incessantly production-obsessed empire and gave us a new life of Sabbath and Shalom. Israel understood God's revelation of the Ten Commandments as a saving event of the first rank and celebrated it as such. Von Rad goes on to say,

Israel certainly did not understand the Decalogue as an absolute moral law prescribing ethics: she rather recognized it as a revelation vouchsafed to her at a particular moment in history, through which she was offered the saving gift of life... with the commandments [God] has offered to [us] life; with the hearing of the commandments Israel was placed in the position of decision for life or for death.⁶

In the Ten Commandments we recognize the revelation of God's divine will for justice to be a saving blessing; a revelation which is the subject of ceaseless meditation and ceaseless joy.⁷ Why does our cynicism rob us of receiving the Ten Commandments in this Spirit of Justice, Blessing, Meditation and Joy? Despite God's gift of freedom, why do we still feel so trapped and alienated? If the cynics haven't heard yet, the UK has just appointed the first-ever minister for loneliness because loneliness is claiming just as many lives as smoking and obesity today.⁸

⁶ Von Rad, 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195 and 200.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2018/feb/27/loneliness-finally-recognised-risk-to-health-tracey-crouch>

In 1941, philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote a book called *Escape from Freedom*, to investigate why humankind struggles with the dangers and the responsibilities that freedom requires. Of so called free people, Fromm wrote:

Man represses the irrational passions of destructiveness, hate, envy, revenge; he worships power, money, the sovereign state, the nation; while he pays lip service to the teachings of the great spiritual leaders of the human race, those of Buddha, the prophets, Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed – he has transformed these teachings into a jungle of superstition and idol-worship.⁹

Fromm reveals that despite our freedom we are still anxious and tempted to surrender our freedom to dictators of all kinds, or to lose our freedom by transforming ourselves into small cogs in the machine; well fed and well clothed, and yet we are not free, but automatons.¹⁰ This is the hard truth we struggle to accept which inspired the Collect appointed for today, the Third Sunday in Lent:

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹¹

⁹ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: H. Holt, 1994), xvi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.

¹¹ Church Publishing, *Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: Abingdon, 1985), 218.

In studying a meditation on this morning's Collect¹² I was invited to ask myself, can we actually admit the plain fact that “we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves”? For those in recovery, Step One of the Twelve Steps¹³ concurs. World history concurs – at least if we reckon that wars and holocausts in the twentieth century took more lives than every single conflict in the nineteen centuries preceding; or if we see that the sin of slavery is the same sin that still thrives in what Michelle Alexander has prophetically revealed in *The New Jim Crow*;¹⁴ or the fact that our elected leaders today are powerless to the endless gun violence that continues to sacrifice the lives of human children by the hundreds to the idol of the Second Amendment.¹⁵ Turning back to Fromm's book, *Escape from Freedom*, I learned that hatred is a passionate wish for destruction; but love is the passionate affirmation of a person. Love is not an “affect” but an active striving and inner relatedness, the aim of which is the happiness, growth, and freedom of the beloved.¹⁶ God's Commandments are a passionate affirmation of our sacred

¹² C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F. M. Zahl, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 36-37.

¹³ https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step1.pdf

¹⁴ <http://newjimcrow.com/>

¹⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/guns-are-americans-golden-calf>

¹⁶ Fromm, 114.

personhood that motivates us to actively strive for inner relatedness, the aim of which is the happiness, growth, and freedom of all people. God, “who broods over us as a mother over her children,”¹⁷ pleads with us to stop worshiping idols and to stop sacrificing human lives to them; to stop misusing God’s name for our selfish ends; to stop toiling ceaselessly like slaves and to prioritize rest; to honor those who gave us life; to stop murdering each other; to be faithful to each other; to stop stealing from each other; to tell the truth; and to be grateful for all we have. These pleas reveal God’s gift of Right Relationship. Walter Brueggemann observes that this relationship of mutual fidelity can flourish under the terms of a covenant-making God who enacts liberation and who has ordered existence for generative well-being; but sadly, many interpretations of the Decalogue have removed the commands from a proper covenantal context of mutual promises, and as a result they are understood as rules without reference to relationship.¹⁸ The Decalogue invites us into *Hesed* – the Hebrew word for loving relationship that is abiding, steadfast, merciful, faithful, and radical – love offered to the thousandth generation of those who love God and keep God’s commandments.¹⁹

¹⁷ <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz/754.html>

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 50-51.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:6.

I invite you, believer and cynic alike, to remember that six-year-old child on the first day of school the next time you encounter The Ten Commandments. A child who knows that they are radically and unconditionally loved because thanks to these sacred guidelines for navigating the dangers and responsibilities of our freedom, no matter what:

**If we're lost we can look—and we will find God
Time after time
If we fall God will catch us—God will be waiting
Time after time.**

Amen.