



Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
June 23, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The other day Emily and I were driving down Main St. into downtown and she commented on a billboard that you also might have noticed: it's just a list of the Ten Commandments, nothing else and no other message. Emily wondered what I thought of it and I made the smart aleck remark that often make when people ask me about displays of the Ten Commandments. I said "I don't have an opinion, I'm not Jewish."

Of course, the problem with making smart remarks is that often people don't really understand what you mean. Emily wasn't quite sure what I meant and you might not be either. But my comment does relate to our text this morning from St. Paul's letter to Galatians, as I hope I can demonstrate.

My comment about not being Jewish relates to the fact that the Ten Commandments were the heart of the covenant that God made with Israel. God promised the Jewish people that they would be his chosen people through whom he would bless the whole world and as part of this blessing he told them to follow the Ten Commandments and base their morality upon them.

The Ten Commandments are not, however, part of God's covenant with us as Christians. This is what St. Paul is talking about in his letter to the Galatians when he says "the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian." For us the law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, is an historical document – valuable, instructive, and useful but not binding on us or part of our covenant with God. The Ten Commandments are to Christians as England's Magna Carta is to Americans: an important part of the history of how we came to be who we are but not part of our legal system.

So, if we are not bound by the Ten Commandments, how do we as Christians know what is right and wrong? As St. Paul says: we have clothed ourselves with Christ. We know the heart of God and thus know what our hearts should be like because we look to Christ as our example and are led by his Holy Spirit. In that

sense, a more authentically Christian billboard would be one that displays Jesus' Beatitudes or Jesus' Great Commandment: love God and love your neighbor. The reason I don't commit murder isn't because it's in the Ten Commandments. It's because that isn't loving my neighbor and it isn't the heart of Christ.

This is both liberating and – if we're honest – a little bit frightening. It's like that first moment you got into a car to drive without one of your parents there to watch over you. It's like the first time you left home to head out into the world to make your fortune. Yes, you are free of mom and dad's rules but now you are also responsible for yourself and the consequences of your choices. We no longer have a short set of rules to guide us, instead we have to be in tune with the Holy Spirit and evaluate each new challenge in life based on who Jesus is and what Jesus is calling us to do in that situation. With great freedom comes great responsibility – to paraphrase Uncle Ben's words to Spider-Man.

We can see a bit of what this fear looks like in today's gospel story. I am surprised in a way – and perhaps you are too – that the Gerasenes do not respond to the healing of the demon possessed man with joy and celebration. They respond with fear and they politely, but firmly, ask Jesus to leave them alone. As much as we talk about wanting freedom, the truth is that there is something in our human nature that prefers the comfortable demons of bondage that we know to the unknown and open world of the Holy Spirit moving in new and surprising ways. There is something in our human nature that would sometimes prefer that our situation stay bad, but seemingly controllable, than our situation become better and require that we embrace God's freedom to be God.

That's why St. Paul, in writing to the Galatians, immediately pivots from discussing our freedom in Christ from the law of Moses to discussing God's freedom to bring all of humanity into his life. Adherence to the law of Moses no longer determines who belongs to God. In Christ God is creating one new humanity. "There is no longer Jew or Greek," St. Paul says, "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In some ways that statement doesn't strike us as strongly in the modern world as it would have struck the Galatians when they first heard it. We no longer hold others in slavery, for example, and we have made good progress in equality between the sexes. But what if we translated it into more modern categories? There is no longer gay and straight, there is no longer transgender and cisgender, immigrant and citizen, liberal and conservative, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

To phrase it that way is to begin to sense how difficult it can sometimes be for us to leave behind our legalistic frameworks and embrace God's freedom to bring all of humanity into his life. Like the Gesarenes we sometimes would prefer that God go away and leave us with our demons of division.

Fortunately, God isn't going to give up on us. God's dream for humanity is that we would become one new people in Christ, no longer divided by tribal identities and no longer bound by legalistic systems that have outlived their usefulness. May Christ give us the grace to embrace the freedom we have been given and to live into God's dream for us.

Amen.