

Pentecost 18 October 4 2020

The news that President Trump has been hospitalized due to a Covid-19 infection while tragic, was not all that unexpected given the lax adherence to some of the basic public health protocols that he seems to have practiced. It is sad, of course, and to see other top government officials stricken is difficult, but I hope it is also a wake up call for others to take the guidelines in minimizing the spread of the virus as seriously as they can. Our Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church, Bishop Michael Curry, has asked us all to pray this morning in the light of this sad and difficult news, so please bow your heads and lift up your spirits in prayer:

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your command you drive away from our bodies all sickness and all infirmity: Be present in your goodness with your children, the president and first lady, and all in the White House or government who have been infected by this virus, that their weakness may be banished and their strength restored; and that, their health being renewed, they may bless your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This morning we've heard the story the people of Israel receiving the Ten Commandments from Moses at the foot of God's Holy mountain. It used to be that many churches had two boards or plaques up around the altar, one had the text of the Lord's Prayer and the other was the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. Here at Good Shepherd, we recite the Ten Commandments at the start of our Lenten worship. So these

commandments have a history in our religious traditions that comes from long ago and continues into this day. But what are these commandments at heart? What was their meaning for the people of Israel, that rag tag rabble of former slaves wandering through the stark and foreboding Sinai wilderness? And for us, what is the value and meaning of these commandments in our own day?

These commandments, I think, are given to the people of Israel that they may learn to be a community, to be a community of free people who are called to live in that freedom and to worship God, to find their life together centered around their faith in God's goodness. I even think that's why there are ten commandments and not eleven, say or twelve: we have ten fingers and that's how you learn them: at least that's how I was taught the ten commandments and to this day that's how I remember them, I have to count them off on my fingers. If there were eleven or twelve commandments, I'd be up the creek! And of course, because even with this easy to remember formula, people still didn't observe the commandments, so Jesus broke it down to an even more memorable formula: you've got two hands, so Jesus says there are two great commandments: Love the God Lord with all your heart and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Regardless of which formula, the point of the commandments is to order the life of the community, to take this rag tag rabble of former slaves and through God's grace to transform them into the people of God, living now in freedom and worship

God in that same spirit of freedom. The first four commandments place God at the center of the community: the God who delivered them from their bondage is the only God, so don't make idols and keep God's Name and God's day holy; the rest of the commandments describe how the community will live together, a set of minimum rules of behavior, if you will, don't kill, don't fool around or steal, don't lie and don't be envious. Like I said, pretty basic rules to follow – as time went on, this became the bedrock of the Law for Israel, the teachings to guide and promote their life together as God's holy people. That is why the Law is not seen as a burden, a whole set of rules and regulations imposed on Israel, but rather a gracious gift, even a deep joy in our lives that in this newly given freedom there is a guide to live fully in that freedom.

The Apostle Paul, of course, is aware of this history. It is his story too. And it is the story of some of the sisters and brothers he has at the Church in Philippi. In writing to them he lays out his credentials, as it were, but then he goes on to say that nothing of this counts for anything to him now, for now, by the grace of God given to him through the power of Jesus' resurrection, the full love of God, that freedom given to his ancestors, is his as well, and by the power of the resurrection of Christ, by that amazing grace of God, his sisters and brothers in the Church at Philippi also are called into this heavenly grace and the full and abundant life of the Spirit of Christ. For Paul, it is no longer the Law that serves to bring God's grace to the community, but rather it is the presence of Jesus

in their midst, who by his sufferings and through the power of his resurrection has now brought freedom fully into the world. For Paul, just as importantly, this is his joy, following his call, pressing on to reach the goal, pressing on to the prize of a full life in Christ Jesus and all the joy that brings into his life. And Paul is fully aware that this is God's gracious gift to him and not what he has accomplished for himself.

Of course, through the centuries, many Christians have heard Paul's proclamation and also sought to follow the example of Christ. Perhaps the individual who has exemplified this most profoundly to many of us over the ages is St. Francis of Assisi, whose day is celebrated today, October 4<sup>th</sup>. I thought it is appropriate today to speak for a few minutes about another figure from the Middle Ages who was a paragon of the Christian Faith. Later this afternoon we will have a special service in Currier Park to bless animals in a way Francis would most likely really appreciate. St. Francis was so Christ-like that the legend of his life is that in his last years he received the stigmata, the marks of the nails of the crucifixion, in the palms of his hands. Unfortunately, if people know of St. Francis at all these days, we know him as the medieval saint who preached to the birds and blessed the animals. Some sort of medieval nature boy, kind of a tree hugger. That's OK, but there is so much more to Francis: he tried to live fully and literally into the grace of Christ: his father was a wealthy cloth merchant in central Italy and sent Francis with a load of cloth to be sold at a neighboring town. Francis took the cloth sold it, but on the way back

home he gave away all the money to the poor he met along the way. Needless to say, his father wasn't too happy, and summoned Francis to admit his fault before the Bishop. When the time came for the appointment, the father and the bishop and the crowd gathered, but Francis was nowhere to be found: but after a minute he walked into the audience stark naked, holding his clothing and a bag of money which he gave to his father and he said, "I give you back what you've given to me. I have no father but God." The Bishop, a wise man, covered Francis with his cloak, giving him the protection of the Church, and thus began his vocation to bring Christ's message of grace into the world in a radical way. Francis sought to share the joy he found in the Good News of Jesus with all, to give voice to the glory of all God's creation, that the harmony of love which infuses all God has made will be exalted through God's loving Spirit. His simple example is so compelling, because in his care and compassion for the poor, in his worship of God throughout all God's creation, Francis saw the depth of God's love everywhere he looked. Of the many things that could be said about Francis, I'd like to leave you with one other example of how he sought to serve in the name of Christ: the Church engaged in the Fourth Crusade during his life, and Francis joined in: he travelled to Egypt, but not as a warrior; instead he wanted to meet the Sultan of Egypt, al-Kamil and talk to him about the love of Christ and hopefully convert him and bring about peace. Unfortunately, Francis' peace plan did not work, but in our day and age, when we once again find our nation

stationing our troops in the Middle East and the contact conflict in that region, I think we should look to Francis to see if there are alternatives to military engagement and warfare.

So this day as we gather, as we come together online once again in remembrance of the amazing grace of Jesus, shared by the Apostle Paul and that simple Medieval saint Francis, and we come to give thanks for this presence of this grace in our lives and here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, a grace which calls us to mission and a grace which moves us forward into what lies ahead, as we press on toward the goal of that heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. May God's grace be ever present with us and may the example of the women and men of faith in our history ever inspire us. Thanks be to God. Amen.