

At Our Best

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 Ten commandments

Matthew 7:24-29 The one who hears these words and acts on them

We heard the Ten Commandments read again and Jesus' story of the wise and the foolish ones building their houses on the rocks and the sand. We listen and we hear passages of scripture like this. We listen for the wisdom and the guidance that we need, or maybe we listen because we don't quite understand what it is we need to be at our best.

We were talking in a program once about friendship and community and what it's like to be with people, and in some settings the people you are with are wrong. There are people that are just not good for you to be with and there are people that are really good to be with and we were talking about the difference. One of the conclusions was that the people that are good to be with are the ones that bring out the best in us. We all have that experience. We know what it's like to be with someone or some people or in a group or community in a certain setting in our life that just seems to bring out the best in us, and we feel that, even for just a moment, we are at our best.

Somehow that feels like a real fulfillment of our life, and so as we listen to the scriptures, the words and so many other things that we do in our lives that are about cultivating our spirituality, or reading books – self-help books out by the thousands in the stores – people are reading those because they are looking for what it takes for them to be the best they can be. That seems to be a universal motivation in the human spirit.

So we read the Commandments and think, well, maybe being our best means following all those rules. But of course, there are more than ten. There are several hundred just in the Bible, and any day you want you can go down to the bookstore and find another book that's got another twelve rules or fourteen steps to successful living or something. So what do we do with all the rules?

Some of us have some trouble with the Commandments. It's not just because they have this authoritarian sound to them. As someone once said, 'Well, Moses didn't come down the mountain with ten suggestions. He had ten Commandments'. It's not just that they are authoritarian, though. It's that they tend to be behavioral, as if there is something external that says, 'If you do this, then you will be approved'.

I saw a sign on the side of a bus yesterday that had a lead line that said ‘The three most beautiful words in our language are You Are Approved’. Whatever ad guys put that together were on to something, something about the human spirit. They were on to that deep thing in us that seeks approval, the feeling that we need to be approved in order to be OK in our life. But it’s an entirely external motivation. It’s like if I came up to you and said, ‘If you do this, then I will like you’. The implication is that if you don’t then you will have my disapproval, so you end up doing what you are told to do.

But is being our best all about doing what we are told? In the passage in the New Testament, we move on to a similar addressing of the question, but in a way that is in a more wisdom tone. It’s not so much an ‘if you do this then the consequence will be that I’ll approve you’, it’s a much more direct consequence. When Jesus says ‘The foolish one built his house on the sand, and when it rained it washed the house away’, it wasn’t because God said, ‘here is the rule: don’t build your house on the sand, and if you do, I am going to come and smash your house.’ That’s not what happened. It was much more direct. He says, ‘if you build your house on sand, the rain washes it away, that’s all’. In a way, the Ten Commandments have that similar aspect to them. It’s an accumulation of wisdom that says this is how life works.

For example, one of the Commandments says ‘Love your mother and father, respect and honor your mother and father, in order that you may live long in the land the Lord has given you.’ That’s not God saying, ‘the people who don’t honor their parents, I’m going to strike them down real early so they don’t live too long, and the ones that honor them, I’m going to let them live long’. It’s saying if you are a society that takes care of your parents in their old age, then you all tend to live longer because you get cared for. It’s a very simple, natural consequence. It’s that basic perspective of saying, here’s how life works. It’s not an arbitrary thing that’s saying ‘I want you to do what you’re told or else I’m going to punish you’. It moves out of that approval/punishment framework into something much more integral about life. Here’s how life works – if you love and care for one another, the world becomes a gentler, more life-giving place. It’s not an arbitrary consequence. It’s what follows naturally.

There is a variety of opinion about human nature within Christian theology. There’s one end of the spectrum that holds a very low view of human nature, that says ‘actually, even people who know how life works go out and mess it up because that’s just the way we are. We are naturally wicked and stupid and we don’t even act in our own best interests’. So we need a bunch of external behavioral rules to tell people how to act so they are acting in a way that is contrary to their own nature, because their own nature is so perverse.

The other end of that spectrum is a view of human nature that says ‘actually, our Creator has planted in us all that we need to live well, and in order to live well, we just need to get in touch with ourselves to know all of the strength and the beauty that is within us and to live from that.’ One of the ways of naming that is virtue. Virtues aren’t arbitrary rules to follow. Virtues are those strengths that God has planted in us. A virtue is, for example, kindness or generosity or determination or integrity. Add to the list for yourself. What are the virtues that stand out as being

important for you? For some, it's affection, for some it's respect, for some it's caring. These are virtues because we find them within ourselves. We find them within our own hearts.

The process of cultivating virtue, of teaching people how to be their best, is a process of finding those things within ourselves and practicing them, strengthening them, learning how to live, to express, to outwardly live from all the virtue that is part of us, to find that wisdom and that kindness and persistence and determination, all of those things within us.

That's where the wisdom tradition is coming from because God doesn't treat people like they are naturally wicked and have to deny their own nature and learn how to act nice. God plants the virtue in us and calls us to find that and to connect with it and stay connected with it and build it and cultivate it and live it and as we live from our own virtue and cultivate that and grow it, it touches others' lives. It functions like a mirror that helps them see the virtue that's in themselves, helps them find within themselves what they see in others who are living from their strengths and their virtues, and that's the way we get to be our best. As we celebrate baptisms here today, at the very depths of our hearts our feeling is looking at these children and saying 'what do they need?' How can we provide them with the influence, the environment, the life setting, so that as they grow their process of formation will be finding those virtues within themselves and learning how to become the very best they can possibly be?

So we dedicate ourselves to living our own best, not just for ourselves, but for those around us and especially for our children and our grandchildren. Every time we have a funeral and we have a son or daughter or someone standing up here giving a eulogy, talking about this beloved person, inevitably part of what they are talking about are the virtues, the virtues that person lived that have touched everyone around them, and they stand there realizing that this person lives on now through us by the virtues they lived that are now a part of us.

So, it's a day to dedicate ourselves to being the very best we can be as the highest blessing we can give to our children and through that, to know, to sense, to imagine how God sees and acts toward us all, wanting to bestow those virtues, that wisdom that gives the whole human family the direction and the courage and the wisdom it needs to be our very best.

Amen.