

## **Living Empathetically: Broaden, Internalize, Reverse**

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**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**

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**Text: Deuteronomy 5:1-21**

Last week we began a series on how the Ten Commandments can still shape our lives as believers in today's hurting, confused and seemingly out-of-control world. On the surface, I suppose nothing could seem as irrelevant as these rules that scripture tells us Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai thousands of years ago.

That is, until we remember the 'when' and the 'why' of it all. Last week we read the version we find in Exodus, which records the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. Today we heard the version that comes from Deuteronomy. In that passage, Moses reads the commandments to a new generation of Israel, just before they are to enter the land God has promised them. It is a firm reminder of how they are to live.

In that land, God knew that Israel would encounter every sort of threat, every new foe and risk. God knew the pressures facing Israel could tear God's chosen nation apart. They would be as likely to turn on each other as they would be to fall at the hands of an external power.

That's why the commandments can – and must – still shape us today. If anything is clear from these tragedy-filled weeks of the summer of 2016, it is that we face our own mix of internal and external threats and forces that can tear us apart from outside, or from inside or both. From Orlando to Baton Rouge and St. Paul, from Dallas to Nice, today's troubles are more than sufficient for today. At times, it feels as if we are almost to the breaking point.

But the commandments, the Decalogue, God's ten words for a covenant community, can be a comfort and a guide in these desperate days. They remind us that God's moral construct still stands and that our Lord has always believed we are capable of more.

This morning, I want to propose that one way we do that is by abandoning ourselves that we might draw closer to our Creator and, in turn, to each other. Last week, I asked you to walk with me as we live decalogically, we live more intentionally by the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue.

We can live decalogically by living more empathetically. Empathy is the capacity to get beyond our own personal, individual experience and perspective so that we can more fully see and respect the experience and perspective of one who is different from us.

The commandments are the blueprint for community and a roadmap to empathy. With greater empathy, comes stronger community. We leave behind our idols, our self-made gods, our self-centered truths and more readily submit to God's will for us as interdependent beings, people who need each other.

With greater empathy, we can see and know the world as seen through the eyes of our brother and sister. With God's help, we can see how our lives are both different and, at the core, the same as our neighbor. We can see that our lives can only be as healthy and secure as that of our poorest sister or our most dispossessed brother. We can escape the prison of our confined reality to see the new life God offers us in each other.

We are gathered amid especially mean times in our nation's history. I am reminded, as the late senator statesman Danial Patrick Moynihan wrote in 1993: "There are today just eight states on earth which both existed in 1914 and have not had their form of government changed by violence since then."

Bringing that up in light of these days in America may sound alarmist to some. But I bet I am not the only one who has wondered how far away outright anarchy really is. And it is not to say that the rage and the anger of some of our national brethren isn't justified after 400 years of legalized discrimination and its heavy legacy.

At the same time, however, after the tragedies in Louisiana and Minnesota and Dallas, I sense a new readiness to see and act on the disparities of our national story. The pain and the suffering of too many of our black neighbors has seemed to reach a critical threshold, one that plunges into the hearts of more white Americans more deeply than ever. At least that is my prayer.

So it seems one prescription for our national cancer might be an IV of empathy straight into the heart of America, that whites might more truly feel the pain of blacks, that the rich might see their lives are intertwined with the poor, that straight people might see and love their LGBT sisters and brothers unconditionally and the gaps of other differences might be closed.

Empathy may sound like an awfully fuzzy answer as we watch smartphone videos, one after another, of African-Americans being beaten or shot dead by police. Empathy may sound like shallow sympathy to the families of the slain police officers in Dallas (and Baton Rouge). We are a nation that is literally beaten and bruised, black and blue.

And solutions are more than just feelings, more than just talk. As we began to discuss Thursday night, we must also take specific action to look more deeply within ourselves and to shape our land's policies, practices and institutions. And we will.

But let me offer three words this morning that can open up both the Ten Commandments and our hearts, that we might see God and each other more clearly.

Broaden. Internalize. Reverse. Broaden. Internalize. Reverse. For years, theologians and scholars have said these are the key to making the Ten Commandments come alive more richly in our lives. And they can awaken us in other ways, as well.

Let's start with **broaden**. When we broaden the commandments, we take them beyond a specific action. For example, do not kill means more than we should try to make it through each day without literally killing someone. It means we have to think faithfully about issues like capital punishment and whether there is such a thing as a just war. It means, as Rev. Rodney Sadler asked at our gathering Thursday night, whether we should permit law enforcement to take a life under any circumstance as opposed to other, non-lethal ways to de-escalate potentially deadly situations.

We can broaden any of the commandments. Do not bear false witness means committing to a life of guarding our tongues, because we can take life with our words just as neatly as with a gun.

The second move is to **internalize** the commandments, take them into our hearts rather than just check the box. The commandment that we should have no other God before the Lord means so much more than we shouldn't melt down our gold into an idol. It calls the question on how we orient our lives, where true north is on our personal compass. It asks, as the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What is our only comfort in life and in death?"

Recently, a person who is early in recovery from alcohol addiction told me about a particularly hard day. She had been sober for more than two weeks, not without a struggle but long enough to see life again beyond the bottle. When work and other pressures mounted against her, she said, it would have been so easy, so very easy, to turn to her old friend.

Instead, she prayed. "I prayed all day long," she told me. "Literally, my whole day was a prayer, from morning to night and in those hours when I was so close to drinking that I could taste it," she said. In that instance, she practiced the commandment to put God before everything, everything else in her life, in order to save her life.

That's what it means to internalize the commandments, to make them the rule for living in our own individual journey.

The third move we can make is to **reverse** the commandments, to see what God is saying in a new way.

"Do not kill" becomes "Do everything you can to promote life." All of a sudden, we are called to think about the environment, which we are called to protect for future generations, something we're doing a lousy job of so far.

"Keep the Sabbath" really does mean protect a day for your own renewal and spend it in some way with God.

"Do not covet" means be content with what you have.

If you have spent time studying the commandments, living intentionally with them in your life, perhaps these three moves – broadening, internalizing, reversing the commandments – aren't new. Perhaps there is no new light for you there.

But focus these angles of interpretation on what can rightly be called our current crisis of national identity. It seems to me, anyway, that we have reached a crossroads in our national life together in the matter of race. We can stand still. We can turn back. Or we can move forward, albeit too late for our African-American brothers and sisters, but, by God's grace, with a new momentum and resolve.

By living decalogically, by deepening our capacity for empathy, we can ensure that we make the most of this moment in our individual and collective lives together. What does that look like?

Let's start again with broadening. Surely now more than ever, this is the time for white people of privilege to get beyond their own experience. We can study and read perspectives on history that we may not have read before, accounts that tell the real impact of 400 years of legalized and socialized discrimination of non-white Americans. We can sign up for a dismantling racism workshop like the one several of us took last year, which sidesteps no aspects of the history of racism.

We must broaden our experience beyond the same, familiar routines with people that look and act like us. And this requires even the most practiced peacemakers to think anew. Greg Jarrell, the QC (*Queen City*) Family Tree ordained minister who lives in solidarity with the neighbors of Enderly Park in west Charlotte, said to me this week. "We all have to relearn how to think about racism in America."

God instructs us, for example, "do not steal." We know from the human genome that all people have 99% the same DNA. But in 1691 the whites who were in control of the colonies defined what it means

to be white. A century later, they ranked the so-called abilities of the races, putting what they termed “caucosoids” at the top and “negroids” at the bottom. In turn, federal law has dispossessed blacks over and over again, from Roosevelt’s New Deal to the GI Bill to federal housing finance laws.

So, we might simplistically check the “do not steal” box if we haven’t robbed someone today. But how much of our personal wealth, our inherited wealth through generations of white advantage, have we really earned. That’s worth a lot more thought.

But our work ahead is not just thinking. It also about feeling, which is what internalizing is all about. This is not a time to utter those simple words, “Can’t we all just get along?” and turn our attention to something less demanding.

I spent time this week with our new friend Hannah Hassan, who organized the open mike night we hosted in the Third Place last week. “How can we internalize what some of us may not have really taken in,” I asked her?

“This is not a time for taking things personally,” she said. “We must allow ourselves to feel, really feel, the pain that comes with these conversations.” By that she meant the anger and frustration of many African-Americans, as well as the truth that many of us with good intentions have been walking around with blinders on for far too long.

We must also deepen the ability to reverse perspectives to see life and the world as it is for others who differ from us, to put the proverbial shoe on the other foot. This week, I have heard from some white mothers as they have truly wrestled for the first time with what it must be like for their black sisters to let their children go out into the world. Another white mother found herself thinking about the lasting effects of trauma on toddlers and preschoolers whose world is drenched with violent images, some all too close to home.

Others have said they have reflected this week on where to put their hands on the steering wheel in case they are stopped by the police. One resident of Fort Mill wondered what his black neighbors feel when they drive down Confederate Avenue to go to City Hall or drive down Booth Street, named for the man who shot the man who freed enslaved Americans. How must that make them feel, he asked?

Closer to home, a lot closer to home, we white Caldwell members might pause and think deeply about what it must be like for our African-American members and friends to worship in this sanctuary that was built with a donated fortune that was made on a slave-owning plantation in northern Mecklenburg.

Some of us might say, to ourselves or out loud, we didn’t know, we didn’t know.

To which our black friends might rightly say, “But we have been telling you, and telling you and telling you. And now, after seeing so many smartphone videos of police and other violence that make the truth inescapable, now you say you see?”

To which all of us can get our knees dirty, praying, “Lord, have mercy.” And then we can get up off our needs and get our hands dirty to change things.

Let me close on a note of hope, a word about how our God hardwires us to do better, to live more empathetically, to share one another’s burdens.

Whether it is watching the horrific videos of recent shootings or seeing someone smash their finger with a hammer, we have all had the experience of wincing at another person's pain. We flinch even if they don't.

Brain researchers have discovered something they call mirror neurons. These are parts of our brain that cause us to feel the pain of others, to have a physical, gut reaction to another person's actions. In other words, God has made us to feel another's pain, to experience in our own way what another person is going through.

But, it doesn't work if we separate ourselves from others, if we cut ourselves off from the life and perspectives of others. God seems to want us to feel empathy ... and equips us for doing so. But if we tribe-up, if we close off, if we turn our gaze away, we not only diminish the life of the other, we make our own lives smaller at the same time.

So whether it comes to the Ten Commandments or neuroscience, maybe God does know what God is doing after all. If we would only listen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.