

Living Decalogically: Decently and In Order
July 24, 2016
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40

If Presbyterians had a family crest, it would probably have a pithy phrase written in some dead language under the seal, some bit of enduring wisdom that captures the essence of our tradition.

For many, those words might be “πάντα δὲ εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν γινέσθω.” That’s the New Testament Greek for “do all things decently and in order.” We Presbyterians have our own inside jokes – and one is our tradition’s penchant for doing things decently and in order.

To be sure, our bias for order serves us well. Our Book of Order brings structure to our life together, whether that is within a congregation, within a Presbytery or at the national level.

But our order should not shackle us. That leads to the other running joke about us, that we have too often been the “frozen chosen,” sitting too still in the pews like a bunch of good, self-controlled Calvinists, and standing too still when the world cries out for action, when it’s time to bring our faith to life in our community.

As we conclude our series on the Ten Commandments, talk about decency and order may seem miles away from what we’ve been talking about for the last two weeks. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the early church at Corinth, where there was conflict about how to worship and other things. But I see a clear connection. The Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, our call to live Decalogically by these ancient rules handed down to Moses, are about living decently and in order.

But that doesn’t just mean being somewhat orderly in worship, keeping the snake handling and the speaking of tongues out of the order of service. Decency and order is not just about being polite to each other and using Robert’s Rules of Order to frame our meetings.

God calls us to treat all life with decency, with respect and dignity. God also calls us to live our lives together with a particular order, God’s order, for our life with God and our life as a covenant community.

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The commandments have traditionally been grouped into two sets. The first four are about our life with God.

Worship only the one God with everything you've got. Make no idols. Honor the Lord's name. Observe a Sabbath, a time set apart for our renewal in, with and through God. When we fail in any of these ways, we fail God and we fail ourselves. We rob God of our obedience and intimate relationship. We rob ourselves of the life that can come only from God.

The order of our lives doesn't have to be any more difficult than that, though we find all sorts of other ways to order our lives, to order our steps. I've always put it in terms of those early lessons we all received in grammar. God is the subject of every sentence in our lives. God is the actor, the initiator of all good things. God acts first, and we respond. We are in there, sure. We may be the direct object, the ones who receive God's action, but who we are, what we do, can only follow what God has done, particularly in Christ Jesus.

What's wrong with too much of our lives is that we think of ourselves as the subject of the sentence. Or we make something else the subject of the sentence. We make idols of our jobs, our money, our addictions, our ideologies, our excuses.

We cannot spend more time with God because our jobs are too demanding. We cannot make room for God because life is too busy. We cannot come to church because, because, because We cannot give more of our time, talent and treasure because, because, because

We selectively remember Christ's teaching to love the Lord with ALL of our heart, strength, soul and mind. We become the master of excuses and then wonder why our lives are out of order.

And these rules transcend tradition and ideology. Whether we think of ourselves as progressive Christians or conservative, whether we think we may have the answers that others don't, however we may interpret the gospel, the first four commandments have always been straightforward: Put God first in our lives and God will be, as Deuteronomy says, lovingly loyal to us through thick and thin.

Then there are the remaining six commandments: respect your parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, lying or rumor-mongering about your neighbor, no coveting what you don't have just because someone else does.

There is order here, too, an order strong enough, durable enough, time-tested enough to transcend time. These are God's words for the children of Israel as they inherited the land the God would give them. They are still God's words for us today, for our society today. Christ seconded this when he said the second great commandment, after loving God with all we have, is to love thy neighbor as yourself.

And, here again we find God's call to decency and order.

Too much of life seems to be out of order. We're living through a political year unlike any other that only seems to get more and more surreal. In addition, amid our exploration of the Ten Commandments, we have witnessed our nation's deepening division and polarizing violence,

shootings of both so-called blue and black. Two more attacks in the last two days. Our world's and our society's brokenness is all too real, all too evident and all too bloody in these weeks.

Behind all of that there is a different kind of dying going on. Not death at gunpoint but a different, more silent, more insidious kind of killing that reflects our failure to care for all of our neighbors. It's true that too many in our nation are robbing themselves by living apart from God. It's equally true that too many others are being robbed, being killed slowly but systemically by the dramatic imbalances in our society, the grand canyon between rich and poor, haves and have nots, those who have easy reason to hope and those who are deep in hopelessness.

Let me be very clear. Nothing, absolutely nothing condones, permits or forgives violence, especially the taking of another life, whether black, blue or otherwise. That is, after all, one of the commandments.

But ... we fool ourselves to think that the desperate voices we hear do not connect in some way to the desperate lives we have helped create among our most marginalized neighbors. We in Charlotte received another condemning reminder of that this week.

Our friends at Crisis Assistance Ministry, the city's primary provider to people in economic hardship, convened a gathering of community leaders Thursday. We were there to hear the latest research on poverty in North Carolina and in Charlotte.

The news isn't good. We already know that Charlotte ranks among the worst cities for economic mobility. That is, the ability of our poorest neighbors to get out of poverty. The news Thursday was that poverty's grip on too many of our neighbors is tighter than we thought. In fact, what the community leaders heard Thursday was a Dickensian portrayal of Charlotte as a tale of two cities, one comfortable, one increasingly desperate.

In fact, Charlotte stands out for how economically polarized we are. On the upper end, one in four households in Charlotte enjoys an income of at least \$100,000 a year, many substantially more. That's far more than most cities. The chamber of commerce might consider that good news.

But as the report said, the fruits of our distinctive prosperity are not broadly enjoyed. In fact, poverty in Charlotte is deeply and racially concentrated. Grab a pencil and take these numbers down:

70% of African-American households – not individuals but households – report incomes of less than \$60,000 a year. That's 7 in 10 black households below \$70,000 a year, while 6 in 10 white households live above that amount.

Three times as many African-Americans and Latinos live in poverty as whites.

The data for our children is even more stark:

36% percent of black children – and 39% of Latino children – live in poverty. Compare that to just 5% of white kids.

This isn't the Charlotte we thought we knew, some might say. What about the city's economic health? The Observer just reported that unemployment is low, about 4.5%. We have bounced back from the great recession, some might say. Just look at all the development and new business energy, despite HB2.

Yes, but. The report released this week showed that we have replaced decent-paying jobs with jobs that don't really pay a living wage. New jobs since the Great Recession are either lower end or upper end. 80% of the new jobs since the recession pay either less than \$36,000 a year or more than \$82,000. The middle class, in other words, has been squeezed out. In other words, more people are falling further and further behind. As a result, poverty is growing in Charlotte at a much faster rate than most other cities.

And, again, this poverty has sunk in most deeply in non-white neighborhoods. Fifteen years ago, 17 of our poorest neighborhoods were non-white, namely African-American. Today, that number of non-white and poorest neighborhoods has risen from 17 to 79.

I realize that's a lot of data. But the bottom line is this. We are a city, more than ever before, of rich and poor. We're a leader - but we're a leader in creating poverty, according to this research.

Social scientists use the term "high poverty" to label these effects. But perhaps we should flip that coin and call it a problem of "high affluence." Because it seems our affluence as a city is blinding us to how we are robbing life from the least among us, how we are failing to treat others with decency, how we are failing to establish the order God wants.

Behind these data are the voices of the poor who were interviewed for this study. They speak as loudly as the data. They contradict the comfortable myth of the so-called "welfare mother" who lives life on the public dole. No, these working women want to work, this report shows. They just want to be paid decently for it.

Listen to the voice of Melissa, who said: "I don't mind hard work. I've done it all my life. But I also want to have a little bit of a life like other people do. I want the chance to advance."

Listen to Cynthia, who said: "I want to grow. I want a chance to make some progress. And even if it's McDonald's, why can't people afford to just sit with their kids and buy a little something, just a hamburger or something?"

Listen to Yolanda, who said: "We have a lot of young men (in the neighborhood) and they have no outlet so they are hurting each other. No one values them."

These are complex questions and realities. If nothing else, we should stop short of generalizing and simplifying the circumstances of the poor as well as potential solutions.

But, in the end, the researchers lift up two qualities for the circle of women they interviewed through Crisis Assistance Ministry. Resilience and faith.

Hear the toughness and resilience of Melissa, who said: "The truth is, as a people this is what we've always been through, all our lives. It is what our families went through before, always a fight, always stress, always struggling to get by. We don't give up."

And hear the faith of Avril. "I would have lost my mind if I didn't know God was on my side. I trust in the Lord.

Adds Melissa: "I learned to trust the things I couldn't see because I couldn't depend on what I could see."

Perhaps the question for us as a people of faith is, "What do WE see?"

Do WE see that our God calls us to provide decency and dignity for every life?

Do we see that our God has provided an order for our life together, a portrait of a covenant community where every life depends on every other life, where none is left behind, where life is valued and fed, where those who have enough are called to be content with having enough that others might have enough, too?

And, do we see that when we fail to live decalogically, life can quickly unravel. When we fail to put God first, our life devolves to idol worship and excuse-making, a life of living by the wrong priorities. When we fail to treat every life with honor and dignity, our life together as a nation unravels, as we have seen this summer.

So what about it? Can you live more decalogically? Can I? Can all of us live together, in peace and respect, mercy and justice, decency and order? Again, I invite any who are interested to gather in The Third Place tonight at 7 to reflect together on what God's commandments mean in our contemporary lives.

And may God summon and equip us to put our lives as a nation, as a state, as a city and as a church in divine order. Thanks be to God. Amen.