

“The Third Scary Word: ‘Obedience’”
March 15, 2009

Exodus 20:1-17
John 2:13-22

As a young kid, I didn’t have much of a problem with obedience, our third scary word of this Lenten season. (Or at least that’s my memory. If you asked my mom and dad, you might get a very different story!)

What I remember is that the rules I was supposed to obey seemed, for the most part, fairly reasonable. Don’t hit anyone ... OK. (Since my brothers were older, stronger, and bigger than I was, hitting them seemed like a bad idea, anyway.) Don’t steal ... I could go along with that, for the most part. Stay quiet in church ... what a great idea, especially during the sermon!! Be kind, be considerate, treat people the same, whatever the color of their skin ... yup, those made a good bit of sense.

A few, though, were a little harder. Don’t dispute your elders ... but what if they’re *wrong*?? Don’t eat more than one piece of chocolate cake at a time ... I’m *still* not so sure about that one.

But even accounting for some rough spots here and there, obeying the rules didn’t seem to impose a heavy burden, and the consequences for breaking them seemed ... well, if not always *reasonable*, then at least *not ridiculous*.

But then I got a little older – 6 or 7 – and I started having questions about the idea of obeying rules. I discovered that a lot of people believed in a rule that said I couldn’t be friends with someone whose skin was a lot darker than mine. A little later, I learned about the rules that said white people and black people couldn’t eat together, couldn’t drink from the same water fountain, and couldn’t use the same bathroom.

A few years later, I learned about civil *disobedience* and about how important and *right* *disobedience* could be. And around the same time, I was learning about a place called “My Lai,” about the shooting of Kent State University students, about the violence used here and abroad by people who claimed that they were merely enforcing rules, who said that they were just trying to keep law and order.

So, by the time I was a young adult, I had a lot of doubts about this idea of obedience. I had started to understand obedience as what’s demanded by someone who says, “You will do what I tell you to do, because I’m your boss (or your commanding officer or your president or because I have the gun or the knife or the biggest bomb or the most money).” I had started to understand that obedience played a key role in cursing the world with the Holocaust of Nazi Germany and that obedience continues to play a key role in countless other horrors. And I started to understand that obedience to the rules often means protecting the status quo, so that the haves get to keep on having and the have-nots get to keep being left behind. I had come a long way from trusting the rules and the rulemakers.

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Now, let’s fast forward, from the time when I distrusted authority, rules, and most certainly obedience, through law school (lots and lots of rules!), through the practice of law (lots and lots and lots of rules, with some ugly consequences for breaking them), and, finally, through divinity school and ordination (lots and lots of rules), so I and we can be

in this very place, the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC, and in this very moment, the third Sunday of Lent. Let's be here this morning, where we have heard the rules known as the Ten Commandments and have heard the story of Jesus cleansing the temple and rejecting the rules for worshipping in the temple that some Jewish leaders had imposed.

In this place and in this moment, let's try to put aside the emotional baggage we may have about rules. Let's try to put aside the resentments we may have built up over a number of decades toward authority and people in authority. And let's try to put aside what we may think we know about obedience and how unwilling we may be to try to obey anyone or anything. Let's take the risk of asking, "What might it really mean to be *obedient* to the God of Life and Love who is revealed in and through Jesus, the one Christians know as the Christ?"

To put aside emotional baggage, resentment, and what we *think* we know about a scary word, one of the most fruitful places to start can be with the meaning, the *origins*, of the scary word itself. Starting with the root meaning of a word isn't just an activity to warm the hearts of the nerd in you and in me; it's a way to encounter the word *before* it accumulated centuries of baggage, misuse, and misinterpretation. If we're willing to start with the origins of the word, we're willing at least to consider the possibility that, despite the ways it may have been used to damage or belittle or manipulate human beings' sense of themselves and their relationship to God, there may be something valuable and life-giving that the word and the ideas behind it are trying to convey.

And that, my beloved brothers and sisters, is the whole point behind the scary-words sermon series this Lent: that despite the real harm that has come from certain uses and understandings of these words, there could be something in them, some expression of healing, love, and truth, that you and I and the world may desperately need.

So what, then, *is* the origin of the word "obedience"? It comes from Latin, and it's a combination of "ob," which means "to, toward," and "audire," which means "to hear." When the two words come together, "oboedire," they mean *to listen to*. To obey means to listen to.

Think about that for a moment. Obedience, in its origins, doesn't require slavish adherence to someone else's rules. Obedience doesn't require that we squelch our own sense of what we should do. Obedience doesn't have to become an excuse for harming each other, ourselves, or anything else. Instead, obedience can become how we orient our lives, how we stand in relation to God and to one another.

Obedience can be nothing more and nothing less than a radical attentiveness to the Holy One speaking within and through our own hearts; nothing more or less than a radical attentiveness to the Holy One speaking within and through other people's hearts; nothing more or less than a radical attentiveness to the Holy One speaking within and through this *and other* religious traditions.

If we're willing to embrace that kind of obedience, what then do we make of the Ten Commandments? Can we obey them, listen to them, and find that they're worthy of our listening and our trust? Let's do a run-through:

1. You shall have no other gods before me. God is God, the Holy One is the Holy One. Place your trust in him or her or it. Worship this God and not the gods of global capitalism and military might, for they will fail you. Worship this God and not the gods of your own intellect, your own political party, your own strength,

- and your own insight, for they will fail you. Worship and trust this God, the One who brought you out of bondage and who continues to offer to bring you out of bondage to your own limitations, fears, and self-centeredness. If I understand it that way, yes, I'm willing to try to obey this commandment, to listen to it and trust it.
2. You shall not make an idol to worship. This commandment seems like a corollary to the first, so, yes, I'm willing to obey. (There's quite a bit of additional commentary as this commandment appears in Exodus. We'll get to that in a few minutes.)
 3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. Well, I don't want anyone using my name in a demeaning or slanderous way, so I'm willing to listen to this commandment and try to follow it.
 4. Remember the Sabbath. God rested after six days of labor; you should, too, and make that day a celebration of God's gifts. In a 24/7 culture, where it can seem that we feel the need to be texting, e-mailing, talking, driving, working, and playing all at the same time, I'd say this is a commandment worth listening to. You and I may not do a great job of living it out – when was the last time you had a full day of rest and rejuvenation? – but we can certainly continue to listen to it and try to let it shape what we do.
 5. Honor your father and your mother. Obeying this one, *listening* to this one, can be tricky when father and mother do not behave honorably. And yet, if we hear this commandment as a call, not to honor any abusive or destructive behavior, but to honor the whole and healthy people that father and mother could be, it's a commandment very much worth listening to.
 6. You shall not murder. I can listen to that one and try to live it.
 7. You shall not commit adultery. Ditto.
 8. You shall not steal. Yup.
 9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (or anyone else). Imagine for a moment what the world would be like if we could all listen to and live this commandment. And, if a false-witness-free world is a little too much to imagine all at once, start with a false-witness-free family or church or city. What a transformative commandment!
 10. You shall not covet anyone else's anything. Not their spouse, their house, their car, their artistic ability, their health, or their wine collection. Be grateful for the gifts and blessings in your own life, and don't go about wanting to grab someone else's. In a culture that often seems to define people by what we have and what we own, I think this commandment is very much worth our time and attention. So, yes, I'm willing to try to obey this one, too.

So maybe obedience to the Ten Commandments isn't such a bad idea.

Now, before I move on to Jesus in the temple and what that story may reveal about obedience, I want to explore the linguistic roots of just one more word. (I promise, this will be the last etymological exploration ... at least for a week.) And that one word is "commandment." With the images that many of us have of a powerful, fearful, threatening god, it's easy to think of the Ten Commandments as a set orders that we'd better follow to the letter *or else*. And, let's face it, in light of the commentary in the

second commandment, with punishment to the third and fourth generation, understanding and experiencing these commandments as coercive orders can be pretty easy.

But ... but, if we look at the root meaning of the word “command,” we discover a different model of the divine-human relationship. The words “command” and “commandment” come from the Latin word *mandare*, which means to entrust, to give into someone’s hand ... to entrust (something) to someone for safekeeping and protection. What a different way to look at the commandments handed down through the ancient Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Instead of being orders and threats and a means of coercion, the commandments are an offering from the God who asks us to listen and then to tend to these commandments, care for them, and preserve what we hear in them as guidance to nurture healing, wholeness, and justice.

And, now, along comes Jesus in the Gospel of John. In this morning’s reading, Jesus is physically and dramatically reminding the religious leaders of his day that, even though they may *claim* divine authority and approval for the commandments and rules they’ve imposed, they have in fact failed to obey God. Jesus tells them that they have failed to listen to the God who calls all people into a life of genuine worship and praise and loving service. Jesus tells the religious elite that they have failed to obey the God who speaks through the prophet Isaiah, reminding us all that the fast and the sacrifice God asks of us is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to share our bread with the hungry.

And just as it was true in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, it is true here in our day, that even when we *think* we’re listening carefully to the Holy One and we *think* we know the commandments with which God has entrusted us, *we can be wrong. We can be, very, very wrong.* And so we are called to keep listening, not only to what we believe we hear in our own hearts, but also to what our ancestors in the faith believed they heard and to what our brothers and sisters of all faiths believe they hear. Jesus listened to the voice of God pouring forth from the prophets of ancient Israel, and he used that voice to challenge the rulers of his day. He listened to the voice of God within himself, and he used that voice to call his disciples to love their enemies, to bless those who curse them, and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and tend the sick.

And, so, let us embrace this third scary word. Let us embrace the obedience that is a careful listening for the Holy One’s voice, blessing, and guidance. Let us care for the commandments that have been entrusted to us and that speak the truth across the generations. Let us remember always that we will not get everything right, any more than the ancient Israelites who passed down the Ten Commandments with a warning of a jealous and punishing god, got everything right.

So let it be in humility and hope that we listen to the God who has been speaking since the beginning of time and who is yet still speaking, so that we can hear and follow the call God has entrusted to us.

Amen.

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