

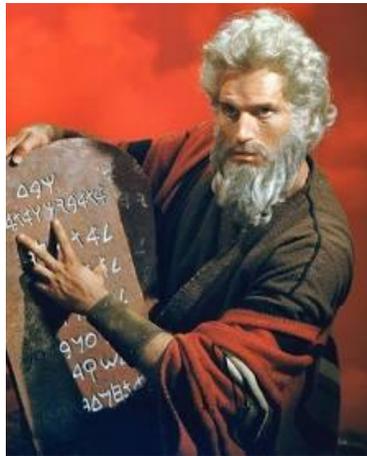


SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 22A, OCTOBER 4, 2020
EXODUS 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; PSALM 19; PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14; MATTHEW 21:33-46

WE DO WHAT WE WANT TO DO

I suspect for many of us the image in our minds that captures the epic delivery of the ten commandments is filtered through the lens of Hollywood filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille in which Charlton Heston's gray bearded character of Moses figures prominently. The classic film has aired during Passover and Passiontide every year since 1973. Cutting edge special effects in technicolor brilliance cast a particularly compelling scene with mountaintop thunderstorms, stone tablets engraved with fiery bolts, a booming voice of divine gravitas, and distressed masses trembling in the valley,



begging Moses to just make that voice stop.

The Ten Commandments are delivered to us again today in this passage from Exodus, and there is still, in the interpretation we just heard, a certain gravitas in the directives: You shall do this, you shall not do that...Perhaps a bit less austere than the echoes of King James' commandments: Thou shalt do this; thou shalt not do that...but a stern tone nevertheless.

It was my children who taught me another rendering of these ten commandments—a version they learned in Sunday School, a version they knew as “The Ten Best Ways for Living.” That is what they really are—guides for good living...yes, directives, decrees, thou shalt, or whatever form of authoritative commandment you may need to hear to get your attention, but few of us respond very well to edicts, or last long in complying to them, if all that guides us is the edict. The apples of self-serving impulses are just too tempting. We do what we want to do.

But as ten best ways for living—now that’s an approach I can get my head and heart around. Love God and love your neighbors in these ways will be life-giving. To do otherwise will stifle you and your relationships, with God and with others. And the rest of Torah is devoted to unpacking that tenfold guidebook. Care for the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant are recurring themes.

Torah is clear on the matter of money, too, and all possessions really—they are all gifts from God, and we hold them for a time as stewards, called to share the first fruits as a thank-offering, sharing them in service to the communities in which we

live for the good of others whom we are called to serve in God’s name.



Torah uses the term “tithe” to reference this first fruits sharing— tithe is simply the scriptural best practice of giving away the first ten percent of our earnings, not as a “thou shalt,” but as a guide for finding life-giving purpose in the giving. It’s the same in the vision that Jesus casts for us as stewards of the kingdom of God here and now, which is why the church uses the term also.

Americans give on average about 2% of their disposable income to charitable organizations. No one is compelling them to do so; I just think humans have some intuitive impulse to give, and we all know the joy that comes in the giving. I believe we were created to give, and to give joyfully, not driven by some authoritarian demand you do so. I hope you will hear that distinction in what I am about to say—an invitation to consider a way of living, not as a commandment.

Today we launch our stewardship appeal for annual pledges to Saint Mark’s as we forge our way in community for the coming year. Across the next few weeks, you will hear a focused invitation for you to make your financial commitment to support the mission and ministries of

Saint Mark's, and to claim your place in this community. I suppose some may hear it as a "thou shalt." Others will likely hear it as our annual beg-a-thon to build a budget. But there really is something more at play here.

This summer a man by the name of Jim Moseley died in Arkansas. He was in his 80s, and he left behind whatever wealth he had accumulated in the course of his long life. None of us will take any worldly possessions with us to the other side, right? He was a steward while he was here—a steward of all that he had been given.

Jim knew well his steward's role, and he shared the vision with others, including Kathy and me, when we were in our 20s, when I was in med school, and Kathy was finishing her degree, and we were living on student loans and Kathy's part-time earnings. Jim was the stewardship committee chair for our church one year, and he made the invitation to pledge, not in a booming voice of "thou shalt," but as an invitation to be transformed by the gift of being stewards, not possessors, of all that we had, which wasn't much in those days.

He spoke of his joy and purpose in giving proportionately, a percentage of his income, not just some set amount. He said we all do what we want to do. I believe

that is true. We do what we want to do. If you want to give, you'll give. If you don't want to give, you won't. But something in Jim's tone and in his message made Kathy and me want to give. I can't really explain it except as a conversion experience about our relationship with money.

And that has made all the difference. It changed our lives. I can honestly say I wouldn't be here were it not for Jim Moseley, the man who died this summer. The steward's steward.

Kathy and I wanted to know the joy of which he spoke, the joy we could see, the joy in giving, the purposeful identity of giving proportionately.

We began small, 2% that first year, and then grew it over time. This year we are pledging 13.8% of our gross income to Saint Mark's, because we want to, because we know that, for us, it is how we strike the chords of joy in our hearts, and gratitude in our lives, and connection in this community which serves in God's name.

I share it with you now, trusting you might hear it as an invitation to consider, not a commandment. Try on proportionate giving rather than just choosing a set amount. But set aside any image of a divine voice booming "thou shalt" in your direction, because what I know is

that transactional math doesn't work in stewardship—God will not love you more if you do, and God will not love you less if you do not. Do what you want to do. Just find the joy and gratitude in whatever that

is. Make it meaningful. Be a steward of what you've been given, and trust that God will use it, and you, for good.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 *[Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."]*



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!