

Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 3B, Sunday, March 8, 2015
Exodus 20:1-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I am a fan of Survivor. I have been since the very first season and I'm pretty sure I've seen every episode since. The show appeals to my interest in studying society and culture and my love of games. The premise of Survivor is that players must work together on a team to get ahead until they must sacrifice those relationships to win a million dollars. There can be only one winner. Many people find this premise repugnant. I don't disagree, exactly, it's just that I also think it's the perfect microcosm of our society. That it's made into a TV game, which by definition is not reality, makes its social commentary wonderfully ironic. Survivor sets up a circumstance, in the form of a game, that offers profound, if uncomfortable, wisdom about who we really are and what we really value. It is, ironically, profoundly real as it reveals difficult truth.

The rules of Survivor are simple... there are almost none. People are divided into tribes, they compete against the other tribes and the losing tribe is required to vote out one of their own members... until the remaining numbers are such that the tribes merge into one and they vote each other out one-by-one. In the end, several of the losing players vote on a winner from the last 2 or 3 standing. There are variations each season but there are never any rules against lying, cheating, manipulating... anything goes... at least officially. What's fascinating and what any Survivor fan who's really paying attention knows, is that there are, in fact, social rules - subtle and not-so-subtle rules - and breaking or betraying those rules will get you voted out or in the least, will not get you votes to win in the end.

For instance, the current season began with 2 randomly chosen members of each tribe being given the power to make a choice on behalf of the tribe. The choice was to take a personal advantage or an advantage to benefit the whole tribe. The pair could choose what they wanted and tell the rest of the tribe whatever they wanted. Lying is not only allowed, but it's an expected part of the game and everyone playing knows it. One of the three pairs chose to take the personal advantage and to lie about it. Unfortunately, they didn't invent, or deliver, a good enough story and their tribe-mates were not fooled. One of the pair was then the first to get voted out. Nobody was upset that they took a personal advantage, or that they lied about it... it's part of the game, but still... on Day 1, it's better to develop trust by working for the team. Perhaps if the unfortunate player who got voted out had been given a list of the real Survivor rules... don't lie so blatantly on Day 1; get along with others; work in a way that contributes to the life of the tribe; trust is the most important currency... perhaps if she'd had such a list, she would have survived longer in the game.

Today we continue our journey through key moments in salvation history with one of the most famous lists of 'rules' for faithful living. The 10 Commandments are the centerpiece of the law code, or Torah, given to the people of Israel, through Moses, atop Mount Sinai, in the midst of wilderness wandering following their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The Torah constitutes

the next major covenant God makes with the people. It is far more specific than previous covenants and unlike the others, this covenant is bilateral. In other words, no longer is it all about God, or one-sided with God taking on the responsibility for its fulfillment. Instead, the Mosaic covenant is a 2-way street, though if we were only to include today's recitation of the 10 Commandments, it sounds more like all the responsibility lies with the people. We heard in the conclusion of God's covenant-making with Abraham: "I will be their God." The people's acceptance and participation in the covenant with the sign of circumcision certainly implies being the people of God but with this covenant of Torah, the people's side of the deal becomes more obvious, more demanding and more specific.

The creedal-type statement that summarizes the agreement is: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The idea of it has been building and developing for some time, notably, for instance, in the Exodus 19, as God first begins speaking to Moses from the mountain: "Now therefore," God says, "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (19:5-6a) It comes again as Moses' big speech is beginning to wrap up near the end of Deuteronomy: "You stand assembled today, all of you, before the Lord your God... to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, sworn by an oath, which the Lord your God is making with you today; in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors..." (Dt 29:10-13) God had already committed to being God to the Israelites, to give them land and nationhood and plenty. To accomplish this, however, the time had come for the people to commit to God's project, to God's way, for the good, for the salvation, of the whole world.

The Torah, of which the 10 Commandments stand as the centrepiece, is much more than a list of rules or a code of law. The Hebrew word "Torah" is most often translated as "law," particularly in the New Testament, but a solely, even a primarily, legal understanding of it doesn't reflect the depth and breadth of what it meant for the ancient Israelites, or what it continues to mean to Jews today. Torah is God's all-encompassing instruction for individual life and more importantly, for the just and righteous organization of society. When psalmists, like that of Psalm 19 today write of Torah, they write of passion, delight, desire and happiness. Following Torah is not a burden, it is freedom. Following Torah is about including God in every aspect of life, from morning to night, from birth to death, through joy and mourning and everything in between. The longest psalm in the Bible, Psalm 119, might be the best and most brilliant expression of it, with 176 verses in the form of an acrostic poem, extolling the glories of God's Torah.

The 10 Commandments we hear today are the beginning. The giving of them is set in the shadow of Egypt, and in the context of liberation from its slavery. Walter Brueggemann describes the commands as "a decisive way in which Israel (and Yahweh) intend to sustain and institutionalize the revolutionary social possibility that is asserted and enacted in the exodus narrative." (NIB, 839) The 10 Commandments comes in 2 sections, traditionally understood as 2 tablets... the first concerning relations with God and the second concerning relations among people. One of the main points of this is just how crucial our beliefs about God, and how we relate to God, translate into how we live in real ways, in time and place. How we relate to God is intimately connected to how we relate to the people around us, with whom we share the world.

Brueggemann summarizes it as “it is important to ‘get it right’ about Yahweh, in order to ‘get it right’ about neighbor.” (NIB, 839)

The 10 Commandments represent a kind of Godly “social experiment in the world, to see whether non-exploitative modes of social relationship can be sustained in the world.” (NIB, 840) The starting place of having no other gods before Yahweh, of not making idols or worshipping anything else, means trusting that enough is enough and not seeking after the riches and power of God. Being in right relationship with God is wholly different than being God. The 10 Commandments are designed to make the distinction clear. The command to Sabbath perhaps embodies most how living in right relationship with God and with the social world serves to show us our rightful place in the world... we will explore this more on Wednesday. The command to honour parents and then the 5 prohibitive commands against murder, adultery, stealing, lying and coveting all point to honouring the life and livelihood of everyone, not just the few... today we might say, “it’s not just about the 1%...” I find Brueggemann’s summary of it all as particularly inspirational. He writes: “the Decalogue stands as a critical principle of protest against every kind of exploitative social relation (public and interpersonal, capitalist and socialist) and as a social vision of possibility that every social relation (public and interpersonal, economic and political) can be transformed and made into a liberating relation.” (NIB, 840)

It hardly needs to be said that such a vision of equality, justice and right relationship is about as far from Survivor as can be. Survivor is about the one, not the many. Players of Survivor will overtly, and unapologetically, exploit others for their own gain. And yet through it, there is often a kind of justice for those who break or disregard the unwritten social rules... they get voted out. And in the end, those who get a shot to convince those they’ve betrayed that they deserve the million must own their game. They must honestly face the good and more importantly, the bad, in how they got there, or they risk losing the money. People must confess to the lies and manipulation and betrayals and if they’ve been too mean along the way, or if they crossed a potentially hard to discern, invisible line of acceptable behaviour, there is often no means of redemption. That player loses.

I have heard, as I’m sure you have, peoples’ objection to religion in general, Christianity in particular and Judaism before that, as a rejection of rules. It’s at least part of the appeal of Survivor. It is human nature to simply not want to follow the difficult and demanding law of the Lord. And yet that law, the Torah of Yahweh most simply summarized in the 10 Commandments, offers a road map to fullness of life for all, with God, in a society marked by justice and righteousness. It is so much simpler than the hard work of figuring out what the “real” rules are before it’s too late, like the first outcast learned the hard way in the current season of Survivor.

May we embrace the covenant of Torah that God sets before us, not as a burdensome set of rules but as a constituent part of free and abundant life. And may we find ways of living and talking about the freedom and life we know in God, that others too may know the joy, peace and love of being in right, covenantal relationship with God and within the human community.