

## Weekly Reading – Monday, September 29, 2008

The focus here are the lessons for Sunday, October 5, the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost. Many congregations will also be observing Worldwide Communion this Sunday. The lessons are of a piece: living in faithful, open and responsive relationship to God, the giver of life and all good gifts. Life does not belong to us. We belong to the Lord.

Exodus 20: 1 - 4, 7 - 9, 12 – 20

The Decalogue or "Ten Words," popularly known as The Ten Commandments. By speaking of these as "The Ten Words," the speaker, that is God, is kept more firmly in the picture. Often the Decalogue is abstracted from the context of the relationship with God and from the longer and larger story of God's dealings and doings, and reduced to ten, abstract, context-less, rules. Viewed in context, these laws provide the shape of life for the people that have known God's liberating grace. Grace requires a response. But the response is not undertaken to win God's love or favor, but because this people has known God's grace and favor and now seek to embody gratitude in actual practices ways of living. There are two tablets, the first having to do with our relationship with God, the second having to do with our relationship with others in community. The lynchpin between those two areas is the fifth, "Honor your father and mother," which means that the familial context is the transition between the two. This division also parallels Jesus' summary of the commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Like the Decalogue, the first directs us to God, and second to others. Preachers have lots of choices with a text like this. They might preach on any one of the ten words, or they might preach on the grace-response story, or on the two-fold shape, first God, then neighbor. Recently the librarian at the Royal Ontario Museum, here in Toronto, told me about several bibles which date back to King James era that are known as the sinners bible. Apparently, the word "not" was omitted in the seventh commandment so that it read, "Thou shalt commit adultery." Oh those modern translations!

Philippians 3: 4b – 14

Paul will often relate his own story, which coupled with various presentations of it in Acts, means that it has become, though not intended as such, the paradigmatic conversion story. Here the contrast is between a life which finds its ground and security in human factors, a kind of resume building exercise, and utter dependence on God's grace. Paul notes that from the standpoint of the human resume of the time, he had everything going for him: a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, circumcised on the 8th day, zealous in faith. A bit like saying, "of the best family, came over on the Mayflower, first in class," etc. As storied Wall Street firms, Lehman and Merrill Lynch have fallen, we see once again that the human names and traditions that seemed so powerful are, in the end, not so. In the church today, security and status are often based on the reputation or glory days of a particular church or how long one has been a member or on having the correct views on various issues. All of this may be fine, but it counts for precisely nothing in any ultimate sense. What does count? Vs. 10: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." Note that for Paul, unlike some contemporary Christian testimonies,

knowing Christ entails suffering rather than promising liberation from it. But this text, as clearly as any, states the case and the nature of Christian transformation: from self-dependence to Other-dependence.

Matthew 21: 33 – 46

A tough text of judgment and hardly easy going for the preacher who would link this vineyard to today's celebration of Worldwide Communion. And yet it can be done. Moreover, it ought to be done. The vineyard tenants have forgotten that they do not own the vineyard. They have attempted to usurp ownership and have treated the representatives of the owner with violence. The haunting words, addressed first to church and then perhaps in another application to the United States, are "Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." God, in grace, has entrusted the vineyard to us, whether we understand that vineyard to be creation, the church, or the human community or the nation and its civic/political life. We aren't owners. We are guests and we are stewards. When we forget that relational or covenantal reality and make ourselves the basis of judgment, God's judgment is at hand. This text could be interpreted in light of the current economic crisis! It's not so much that the Giver takes away the gift, as by our own choices, we lose it. Today in the mainline Protestant church I fear that we are often indifferent to the authentic religious needs and longings of people. We are busy with our programs, structures and re-structures, and assure ourselves that ours is the "right" position on various issues and not like the terrible religious right. Meanwhile, however, there is almost no connection to an entire generation of people under 40!