

Second table

When I was in seminary, one of my professors told a story as a sermon illustration that has stuck with me. Apparently it stuck with her as well since she referenced it again in a more recent podcast I watched on You Tube. The podcast was part of a series on the Old Testament vision of community.

The story came from early in her career as a pastor when she was helping with the craft project in vacation Bible school. She was working with a group of third graders. The lesson that day was the story of God speaking to Moses from the burning bush.

The kids were supposed to take a piece of orange or yellow tissue paper shaped to look like a fire and write down on it what they thought God might say to them.

One little girl took hers and wrote “follow your bliss.” God would say follow your bliss. Dr. Shifferdecker has been laughing at that for decades now and always follows the story with this - “God absolutely is not going to tell you to follow your bliss.”

What God said to Moses from the burning bush definitely wasn’t that. You could pretty easily substitute God speaking from Mt. Sinai.

What God said to Moses and to Israel from Mt. Sinai also wasn’t follow your bliss. When God speaks in the biblical stories, it’s never follow your bliss.

To be sure, God does often speak words of comfort and hope. God expresses deep love for people and the world God created. But often God also speaks words of challenge.

To Abraham and Sarah...go...leave the life you know and go to a place I will show you.

To Moses...go to Pharaoh and say let my people go.

And here, on Mt. Sinai – I am the Lord your God. I have freed you from Pharaoh. Now go and live this way. The commandments were instructions for how to live as a free people. How to live as a community...a people...of God.

God called Israel way back in the call of Abraham to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Their deepest identity came from being called into being by God, called into community, and called to be a blessing.

That’s what these commandments are for – a guide to live as a community that is a blessing to all people.

Now, 3000 years later, we live in a nation founded on liberty and individual rights. That's not a bad thing.

Prior to those enlightenment ideas of the 17th century, kings and popes in the western world ruled peoples' lives. For individuals to have the right to rule their own lives was ground-breaking.

But that individualism crept into Christianity and morphed into a faith that was mainly about individual salvation and a personal relationship with Jesus.

When we hear the commandments, we tend to hear them as instructions for personal morality. We don't even tend to think in the sort of collective way Israel would have.

At their base, these commandments are mostly not much different from secular laws and rules that govern individual behavior.

But if they are really about how to live as a community which brings blessing to the whole world, what would that look like in the 21st century?

What would it look like to actually live the commandments as a society? Not with an eye to forcing people into a Christian mold, but with an eye to creating a world closer to what God intended. What should that community look like? Do we really even want the kind of community God envisions?

We might pay lip service to community. But the ten commandments force us to ask some hard questions about what community looks like, and who it includes. They force us to take a hard look at whether or not we are really living into these commandments.

Sometimes, people will look back to some golden era where community seemed to be more of a reality. Think 1950's and early 60's small town America.

It was a time when life seemed simpler. Neighbors knew each other and socialized together. Kids could play outside until the streetlights came on and parents looked out for each other's kids. If a neighbor was in trouble or sick, people banded together to help out. Parks and swimming pools were havens on warm summer days. It was the golden era, so the story goes.

But when courts began mandating integration of public places, some of those idyllic small towns drained and filled in public swimming pools rather than swim with black people. Then nobody could swim. The vision of community was too small and everyone lost out.

Too often, communal life has been seen as a zero-sum game. If you get something to give you a leg up, then it means I'll get less.

Heather McGee is an American scholar of economics and racial justice. She wrote a book called *The Sum of Us*.

The book deals specifically with the zero-sum game as it applies to efforts to establish racial equity. The fear has always been that helping black and brown people will hurt white people. But she cited example after example of how those efforts typically help everyone. They help whole communities.

That's what love your neighbor might look like. That's what truly living the 10 commandments might look like...building the sort of communities and society that work for everyone.

If we are going to take an honest stab at living this second table of the 10 commandments in the 21st Century, we are going to have to take a wider stance than the one of individual morality. And it's always going to involve some difficult conversations.

Imagine a society where these commandments really happen. For one thing, since God is speaking to a people...a community...and not just individuals, that community needs to support one another with the tough stuff. Nobody goes it alone.

So, honor your father and mother doesn't mean just I and my siblings have to figure out on our own how best to care for our aging parents. For that commandment to be really true means having conversations at a community level how best to care for and honor our elders.

During the pandemic, the shortcomings of our current system for caring for the elderly became glaringly obvious. There are some novel ideas out there – intentional multigenerational living and different sorts of communities.

But costs for quality care for elders to live in dignity and honor are out of reach for many families. How do we as a wider community address things like that?

You shall not murder. I'm confident that as individuals we have nailed this one. But as a people...as community...it gets a little murkier.

We may never have directly killed anyone. But we as a people have created a society in which how long you live is far too connected to your socioeconomic status.

You shall not steal. Again, as individuals we probably aren't thieves. But as a people...a society, economic policies have shifted ever more wealth away from the middle and bottom to the top.

And bearing false witness? Spend a little time on social media if you want to see that one in action.

Can we imagine something different? Perhaps to some this sounds more like ideology or politics than Bible. But if the commandments were spoken to the newly freed people of Israel...to a people and not just individual persons, then perhaps we should hear the words the same way.

Imagining new ways to do things that fulfill these commandments is answering our call to look out for one another – to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.

It's answering our call to build community, not as a zero-sum game, but as a place where all can flourish.

Because ultimately, the commandments are about life. They are meant to be a gift rather than a dreary list of buzz killing rules. They do challenge us. But they also invite us into God's mission to bless the whole world, to trust that God will complete that mission...and to trust that that mission truly is good news for all.