

15 May 2016

Obedience

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Matthew 5:17-20

The name “Deuteronomy” means, literally, “second law.” The name comes from the fact that much of this book restates the laws found in Exodus. Our reading today, Deuteronomy 6:1-9 follows immediately on Deuteronomy’s restatement of the Ten Commandments:

Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The New Testament is often seen as a rejection of Old Testament legalism and concern about the letter of the law. Here is what Jesus said about the “letter of the law” in Matthew 5:17-20:

‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’

We’re talking this month about different paths of faith that people take. I don’t mean different religions or denominations or churches; I’m not talking about doctrinal distinctions. I mean different methods of approaching and living your faith based on your unique personality and gifts. Last week, I talked about “wonder”: the capacity for religious awe inspired when one beholds beauty and the glories of God’s creation and work. There are a few people for whom this is their primary expression of faith. Most are under the age of six, but there are some adults who have retained or rediscovered this sort of faith. And, as I said last week, even if this isn’t our primary path, we all need to foster this capacity. Unless we can experience wonder, we cannot truly praise God. So find an adult who does this well, and learn from that person. Failing that, find a preschooler.

For all the importance of wonder, though, most of us are wired differently and respond to the world in different ways. Where one person might gaze at the Grand Canyon at sunrise and be

filled with praise and wonder at that magnificent tableau of red sky washing over the delicate, multi-colored layers on the cliffs, another person will look at the same scene and try to date the different layers in geological time and wonder if the redness of the dawn indicates a sandstorm in Nevada. Maybe you know that person. Just accept him, all right? He's normal; it's how his brain works. Some people simply respond to nature, to the world, to human relationships, and to God by seeking to understand them. This generally requires taking things apart – literally, if possible; theoretically, if not – sorting them into categories, and then mastering them piece by piece.

You may know adults like that – a lot of them are engineers – but what you may have forgotten is that nearly all of us were like that at one time, when we were school-age children. Think about the children you know. You know, the ones who can name every dinosaur ever discovered, can keep up with all their changing names, and can sort them into Jurassic, Triassic, and all other eras. I'm talking about the ones who know all eight-hundred-plus Pokémon and exactly what each one evolves to under what conditions. Children at that age like things that make sense, that can be learned and mastered, because clarity and certainty are comforting. Children like clear boundaries by which to sort reality and direct their energy. To put it another way, they like rules.

I know: some of you parents are already thinking, “My kids don't like rules.” Actually, they do. The reason they keep testing those rules is because they need to make sure that they're really there. And your kids who test them the most are the ones need them the most. Right, teachers? Our first child, William, was an easy-going, pleasant, compliant child who always did what we told him. All our friends were astonished at how easy he was, and Rebecca and I privately decided that we were the world's best parents. Then God sent us Ethan. Because God's like that. Ethan broke every rule, crossed every boundary, challenged every command – and then watched to see what we would do. It wasn't just rebelliousness; Ethan is just wired for clarity, and he needed to be absolutely sure that the rules were firm. But my point is, children need and want rules. Some need them desperately.

Now, just as preschoolers generally grow out of their endless capacity for wonder, so children generally outgrow their strong need for firm boundaries. But not all of them. Just as some adults retain the preschool child's capacity for wonder, other adults retain a deep preference for clarity in understanding and diligent observance of reasonable rules. To this day, our Ethan maintains a deeper need for clear boundaries than his siblings.

And how does a person like this live faith? First, by seeking to understand God. Yes, he knows he can't fully grasp eternal God, but he can certainly understand God *better*. These are the people who write Systematic Theologies, where they break the study of God down into its parts – Theology, Soteriology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology – all of which sound (and I *don't* think this is an accident) like dinosaurs. This person reads, dissects, masters, memorizes, and honors scripture. As Psalm 1 puts it, *His delight is the law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night*. And how does this person live his Christian life? Essentially by acting on the precepts that he has learned. By keeping the rules.

Our Old Testament reading, from Deuteronomy 6, represents this approach to faith. It says, “You've heard the rules. Now learn them, memorize them, keep them close always, and

teach them to your children.” *Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*



(I do suspect that the bit about writing the law on our foreheads is one of those places where we should not take the text literally, mind you.)

People whose minds work like this simply find their greatest comfort in learning rules for living, and then following them. It's called "obedience," and it's a valid and honorable way to live a life of faith.

Unfortunately the word "obedience" has come to have a negative connotation. To many, it implies a shallow, legalistic, and unthinking concern about minutia. But it doesn't have to be like that. Note that in the middle of our Deuteronomy passage on keeping the law is the greatest verse in Hebrew scripture: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* It's not that some people love God and other people just follow the rules. Rather, following the rules is one way that some people *express* their love for God.

Jesus himself seemed to appreciate this. In the Sermon on the Mount he challenged many of the Old Testament commandments, not by attacking them but by internalizing them and taking them the next step. For example: "You've heard it said, 'Don't murder people.' That's good. Now try this one, 'Don't hate people.' That's what the law's really about." Jesus was all in favor of obedience, so as that obedience comes from the right place: from love. That's what he means when he says, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.*

We have people in this congregation who think this way, thank God. These are people who love clarity and are impatient with ambiguity, and who always put feet on what they believe by living in accordance with their faith. They are, as James puts it, *Doers of the word, not hearers only.* After all, obedience has nothing to do with what you think and everything to do with what you *do*. These people love God just as deeply as any contemplative monk or mystic, but they express their love through obedience. As a church we'd probably have to close our doors without them.

Now this is not my preferred spiritual path; I get impatient with rules and relish ambiguity. But even those of us who don't naturally think this way, have much to learn from those who do. From them we can learn that ambiguity has limits. In fact, it can become an

excuse for people who are too lazy to do hard thinking. Sure, maybe God is ultimately beyond our understanding, but we still need to try? Moreover, fuzzy thinking and vague, generalized “spirituality” are not especially useful. They don’t necessarily lead to any actual behavior. The more clearly we think, the more decisively we can act. From these people, the rest of us can learn that it is not enough to have right ideas. Just *believing* things is inadequate. Again from James: *You show me your faith without works; I’ll show you my faith **by** my works.*

We live our faith-lives differently, but generally within certain broad patterns. Maybe you’ve recognized yourself in one of the descriptions I’ve given the past couple of weeks. But there’s something more important than just being able to categorize ourselves. It’s to understand those whose faith is different from ours and, ideally, learn from them.