

Listen, Obey, Love

Deuteronomy 5:6-22

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Listen!

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
וְאַהֲבַת אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ:

“Hear, Oh Israel. The Lord your God, the Lord is One.”

Or, “Listen, Israel – the Lord is your God, only the Lord alone.”

Or (this is Eugene Peterson’s version from the Message) “Attention, Israel! God our God! God, the one and only!”

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your self or soul and with all of your strength or power or (as my Bible works programs translated it) ‘muchness’ or abundance.

These words from Deuteronomy six and all of the texts that we heard today are part of Moses advice/commandments/commissioning/reminders to the people of Israel when they are at the verge of crossing into Canaan, the ‘land flowing with milk and honey’. Deuteronomy is a graduation address, of sorts. The Israelites have accomplished something quite astonishing and Moses speaks to them about this experience, about God’s part in it, and about what they are to do now.

Moses repeats the call to ‘Hear, O Israel’ or ‘attention!’ or ‘listen up!’ or however you want to translate it, many times in his final sermon...he says it before the ten commandments and after, before he reminds them that they will be going into a land whose people are stronger and more numerous and more established, when he is reminding the priests to call on God’s name in battle. Again and again he needs to call on them to listen.

James Brenneman says of the Shema, “They are the magnet words around which the rest of the words of Scripture like iron shavings cling. The very first word, ‘listen’ is proclaimed some 26 times by Moses in Deuteronomy.” These are words that have been recited by Jewish faithful for 2500 years. They are often the first words of scripture taught to children. Moses says ‘listen’ not only because he need to wake up a drooping audience – and if he indeed spoke all of Deuteronomy at once that was probably not a bad idea – but because what is contained within it is really important – particularly the words of the ‘the Shema.

The advice to listen is no less needed today, where we are surrounded by noise. The people of Israel had wandered in the dessert for a generation, so there was surely the noise of animals and families and trade and movement, but think about the noise that surrounds us today. Traffic, construction, airplanes overhead, cell phones ringing. And that doesn’t include the noise that we choose – music or television – and the sounds of our conversation.

Joe rides the bus and insists that he needs his iPod just to drown out other people's music and loud conversations. There is so much noise that we need to make a conscious effort to be silent. The way that I do this is to schedule regular spiritual direction because I know that in my life, even though my intentions are good to do daily reflections readings, the reality is that it happens way less than I want it to. In that space I can be silent, use my imagination, reflect on my life of ministry and beyond, be fully present to the Spirit and she to me. And even in that still setting there is a ticking clock and a snuffly dog and chirping birds and sometimes construction outside.

We *need* this reminder to hear or to listen. You may remember that the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 11 went looking for God on a mountain.

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

And in that silence, following the violent sounds of the pounding of nature, there could be heard the still small voice of God – who actually said to Elijah ‘what are you doing here?’ and then commissioned him with specific instructions in continuing his prophetic ministry to Israel.

Listen! or Quiet! or pay attention! are certainly phrases that I use with relative frequency when I am teaching Sunday school to youth, who though curious and intelligent and engaged young people are also readily distracted by each other and the world around them. Moses' frequent calling the Israelites to attention are markers by which he calls them back home, centralizes attention and gets back on track, just as we do in Sunday school.

It is in the silence that we can listen for the silence where God is speaking. We don't want to miss something. So Moses tells his people – quiet! listen! I know you may have heard this before, but it's important and to some of you it will be new. That was certainly the case after his first ‘pay attention’ moment. The 20 commandments we given at Sinai and we read them in Exodus. But they are a key piece of the law that address both our relationship with the One God, Yahweh, and order and protect our relationships with each other.

Remember!

The whole purpose of paying attention is so that we will hear (or hear again) the instructions and commandments that Moses is delivering. Moses' begins his iteration of God's commandments of course but saying ‘Hear, O Israel,’ and he goes on to say, ‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; *you shall learn them and observe them diligently.*’

Here is Moses, speaking this long sermon, that becomes a book of law, saying to these people – Learn this! Remember it all and obey it! Be diligent. And the first laws that they hear from him are the Decalogue, or the 10 commandments. The word commandment (or some form like command or commanding) appears in the book of Deuteronomy over 90 times. And obey (not surprisingly) also appears quite often. There is a list of blessings for the people of God – on their cities, harvests, children, livestock etc etc – if they obey these many laws or commandments and conversely Moses proclaims the opposite too – a curse – if they do not obey the commandments.

What appears almost as often as obey, however, is the word ‘remember.’ Remember what God did for you. Remember your relationship to me. Remember how you once were and what has happened since. This language of memory infuses the law in a way uncharacteristic of any other similar log of laws of the time in other cultures. The obedience of the Israelites is to be based not on fear of consequence, but on the grace that YHWH has shown. Perry Yoder, who some of you will remember from his visit here a couple years ago calls this the ‘therefore pattern’: I have done that, *therefore*, you shall do this. Remember what I did for you in the land of Egypt. Remember, remember, remember and this remembering will direct your ethics. Remember you were a slave and an alien in Egypt, therefore treat aliens and sojourners with justice and righteousness.

Seattle Mennonite is not a rule oriented congregation but we should be a congregation based on remembering. Not only our own story and what has been important in shaping us, but remember *the* Story. Christian obedience based on remembering. God did not leave this therefore pattern ethics in the Old Testament. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are totally a rhythm of the therefore pattern of grace based ethics. Not only did Jesus demonstrate an ethic, he sacrificed his life for that non-violent ethic and for our sakes. Therefore, we should be motivated to live into that non-violent love.

In preparation for my upcoming travel to Paraguay in July I have been reading about the Mennonite who settled in Paraguay in the 40’s and 50’s. Their trip was grueling and they arrived in a new place with basically nothing, starting from scratch to try to figure out how to make a life in a barren place...much like the Israelites were about to do...and the new Paraguayan Mennonites counted on their retelling of the stories of God’s mercy, of faithfulness in generations past, in the miracles of escape from Russia when all seemed lost. In remembering God and continuing to tell their stories to each other they have not only made a way but thrived as an alterni-cultural group of faithful Christians in Paraguay.

Love!

Some of the folks who ended up in Paraguay were Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan and other parts of Canada who were upset that the Canadian government was no longer allowing Mennonites to operate schools in German and (perhaps more importantly) was not allowing automatic exemption from military service. There were some things that were so important to these folks that they needed to find a new place to be and Paraguay was it.

They decided that their bottom line (or lines) for faithful conduct required their own schools and no military service. What are our bottom lines? Moses lays out a whole lot of commandments - Now how do we know what to obey? It is obvious that even most Jews do not obey all the laws. I think most of us can get behind what's in the Decalogue, although how well we observe the commandments (especially those related to idolatry and Sabbath) is debatable. But the rest of the law...that's difficult and it's the reason that many Christians, especially those of us who value and uphold peace and equality, ignore or reject the Old Testament and the Mosaic law, which sets an 'eye for an eye' standard and which views women as property and regulates the ownership of slaves.

The law is not flat, however, and discernment within community is important. It *is* a law based on grace and allowing for choice. The heart of these 10 commandments that we heard this morning, and of all the others is summed up in the Shema: Hear, Israel, The Lord your God is the One Lord. Love this Lord with all your heart and soul and strength. We have an instruction from Jesus that teaches us that this is the first and the greatest commandment, and even better, he gave us another: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. In fact he said that to love God fully and to love one's neighbour as oneself is the *essence* of the law and the prophets.

Remembering God's grace and loving the God who loved us first. That the law at its center. Remembering continues to come into our discernment of how to distill the commandments. Including remembering the stories of our Mennonite and Anabaptist forbears and what was most important to them. German school – maybe not so important to us anymore (although teaching in the German language continues to be important to Mennonites on the Paraguayan colonies). Eschewing war and violence – yes, that's still an important principle of being a faithful Christian.

We have a choice – could have (should have) added in my title: 'live'. Moses invites the people of Israel to follow these commandments in order that they might have life. Although we are entirely free to follow or not to follow the law of love, the way of life, the way of abundance and prosperity are in the law.

If Jewish children learn the Shema as their first passage of scripture, my first memory verse was John 3:16 "for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." Not too many people in my generation or younger can speak a Bible verse by heart (although I think in our congregation, some of the tools that the Atrium is giving children is changing that among our young ones). This is still the only verse I can rattle off like that. But as a new testament believer, this first learned verse, like the Shema, demonstrates the grace based ethics of love that God has instructed through the centuries. The Israelites hear, Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery. We hear: I gave my son, believe and have life.

Again and still...Life! Chose so that you may live.

As we know so well, life does not become easier after graduation, or the beginning of a new job, or after baptism, or after a move or big change, even if it's one we've been looking forward to. However much we anticipate changes and transitions, life can be even harder afterward. I'm sure young people graduating from collage are feeling that acutely in this job market. We are called on to choose life in our new roles, or perhaps in the waiting and the silence of listening for God to speak. To listen, to remember, to love and in doing so to live fully, that is how we are called. May God bless us all in our seeking to answer it.