

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 11, 2012  
Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17 and Mark 2:13-17

## GOD MEANS BUSINESS, BUT WHAT BUSINESS?

Two people are walking together. Suddenly, they see coming toward them another person with a large dog on a leash. Because the two are walking side by side, they have the same view of the dog, but they don't see the same dog. One walker picks up speed a little, smiling and hoping to pet the animal; the other slows almost to a stop and does not smile. The dog-lover has felt a surge of interest, the other a surge of fear. One sees a furry friend, the other a dangerous beast. What makes the difference is experience.

When you and I view the same object we do not necessarily see that same thing. Where I see a house, you may see your former home and have many memories connected with it. Where you see a stranger, I may see a friend. The same holds true for what we perceive with our other senses. Because I am dangerously allergic to some perfumes and colognes, what I smell is not at all the same as what you smell even though our noses perceive the same fragrance. You may think of springtime or even romance while I think of Benadryl, swelling, and severe pain in my chest and head.

Further, we do not perceive each sight, sound, odor, and texture as something unique. We could not overload our brains that way or take the time to distinguish each object or even each person we see in a day. Too much happens. So our brains quickly categorize what we see and hear, ignoring many perceptions almost completely and giving only scant attention to others. Do you notice each car that passes by as you drive? No, you later report only that the traffic was heavy or light. Do you see each child in a group at the school bus stop? No, you see a group of children or maybe just a school bus making you a little later.

This is how prejudices work. When Jesus' highly religious critics saw the people with whom he associated and even shared meals, they felt disgust. To them, "that kind" of person was disgusting morally and spiritually. They did not see individuals but only types. Worse, to their minds, by associating himself with "such people," Jesus, the teacher of the things of God, was making himself even more disgusting than the sinners. *He should know better, and it's not just his own reputation he's dragging through the mud, but the holy name of God!*

Jesus and these highly religious people see the sinners very differently, but that's not the only divergence in their perceptions. They also see the commandments very differently.

For the critics, God's commandments are a source of sacred obligation and of pride in fulfillment. They see themselves as commandment keepers. No, they do not regard themselves as perfect. They know they need forgiveness, but they also believe that by doing their best to keep the commandments, they have earned the right to God's forgiveness. In their eyes, the sinners do not have the right even to ask because they have not committed themselves to commandment keeping. What obstacles may have stood in the sinners' way toward seeking God? What forces or conditions may have kept them from being accepted in the community of faith? How have they been dragged down in life? The commandment keepers do not care to know, and they flatly condemn Jesus for caring about the people who so disgust the virtuous.

Even among modern Christians and, I think I can say with confidence, among us here this morning, the Ten Commandments are not one thing, the same for all. Of the ten, some hear only one – whichever one they dread because it touches their guilt and shame. Others hear none at all but only the voice of a parent or teacher who made them memorize the list, and so the scripture reading triggers memories of resentment or else pride. Some are simply bored: "I've heard this before, and there's not even a story but just a list of do's and don't's. Upon hearing and recognizing the commandments, some people feel anger and disgust for "this new generation" that disregards them or for "the government" that won't allow them to be forced upon children in public schools. Some feel indignation at what they regard as moral laxity and comment that they're the Ten *Commandments*, not "the Ten Suggestions." God means business. Yes, God does mean business, but of what kind? Jesus and the commandment keepers did not agree.

What is God doing by giving the people of Israel, through Moses, the Ten Words or Ten Commandments we read from Exodus 20? What is being done to and for the people? Are they being coached in the fine religious and moral art of being good and earning God's favor? No, they have already received God's favor and much more. Before giving a single commandment, God declares: "I am the LORD *your God*, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The relationship already exists because God has adopted the people and now self-identifies as their God.

When you receive a new child into your family, by birth or adoption, you are changed permanently. You are no longer the same person. You are now that child's parent – mother or father – for the rest of your life. You will never be the same again, and you cannot deny that child without denying yourself.

God has adopted the children of Israel, committing to them so powerfully and completely that God will never be the same again. By free and sovereign choice, God has become their God, making the covenanted relationship between them crucial to the identity

and life of both God and the people. To be sure, God means business, but it is and ever shall be the business of redemptive, quite parental love. The Ten Commandments are not mere standards for goodness, virtue, or moral worthiness. They are the instruction of Parent to child, and because the Parent is God, they are powerfully creative. As in Genesis, God says, “Let there be light,’ and there was light,” so now in Exodus God says in effect, “Let there be Israel as my own people,” and there comes into being for the first time Israel as the covenant people of the LORD God.

But there’s a big difference between the creation of light and the creation of Israel. Light is what it is and does (at remarkable speed) what light does – nothing more, nothing less. Light never forgets to shine, never refuses either. Light has no will or self-generated purposes in mind. But because God loves and longs to be loved in return, God chose to make us free, and right there we find the source of all our troubles and all our hope. We do not have only to obey the commandments because our obedience is not enough for God, who wants us to respond freely, willingly, and purposefully. Jesus could take charge of the commandment to keep the Sabbath because what he wanted was in harmony with what God wanted. So, he broke the rule by working to heal sick and broken people on the holy day when such work was forbidden.

I need to say some more about the feeling of disgust because it lies at the heart of the spiritual conflict between Jesus and his critics. In our biology, our bodily makeup, disgust probably developed as a reaction to bad food. As such it is tied to and imitates vomiting. It is the “yuck!” affect which plays strongly in the development of our prejudices. We learn from our parents and culture to find some people disgusting and to associate them emotionally with the yuck affect.

Did Jesus approve of all the bad things the sinners did or excuse their failures? That question is framed in the manner of his critics, the disgusted ones, the judges of human life and behavior. What they seek from God is approval, and so they frame their judgments in terms of approval and disapproval. Jesus does not. He knows God’s love for the people, including the sinners, and so he bonds himself with them. Even if he feels disgust at things they do, he now shares in it; he is in life’s disgusting matters with them. If your child falls into a cesspool, you go into it after him, because you do not love the cleanness, you love your child. And if, as is more likely, the cesspool is figurative not literal, you go into it anyway. Jesus meant business, but it was God’s business of redemptive love focused on the children, not on the mire in which they were stuck. Like Jesus, we the people of his church are called to be about our Father’s business. Amen.