

DISCOVERING GOD: BANKING ON GOD'S RULES

EXODUS 3:7-8; 20:1-17

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We are talking over these weeks about discovering God. Today, discovering God by banking on God's rules. God's rules – the Ten Commandments – which stand for all of God's statutes and ordinances can be counted on.

In what sense can we count on these rules? We can count on these rules in the sense that they reveal to us three important characteristics about God and life.

First, the God who meets us in these commandments is a personal God, not a distant watchmaker God. Second, these moral/ethical rules for living are based on the principle that all of life is sacred. And lastly, in the process of embracing God's law for living we embrace a process that renews and restores us as God's people and gives us abundant life.

The God who meets us in these commandments is a personal God. The God of the Old Testament gets something of a bad rap as a distant and wrathful God, while the God of the New Testament is thought to be loving and personal. I'd like to explode that myth.

When you read Psalms like 139 you see how personal the Old Testament God is: Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and rise up; even before the word is on my tongue you know it completely.

Imagine a God who knows the words we are about to speak before we speak them. Last weekend Carol and I got away. She brought along an "intimacy survey" she found in a magazine. A 49 question/7 category inventory of spousal intimacy. One question was: do you know what your partner is going to say before she says it? God, like an intimate life partner, knows what we are going to say before we say it, says the psalm.

But lest we think the 139th Psalm an aberration, consider the God we meet in the Ten Commandments. These ten words for living are based on the contract between ruler and people in the Hittite kingdom of 1400 BCE. Here the king recounts his benevolent acts for the servant to which the servant is expected to respond whole heartedly.

The form of address is "I-Thou." So in the Ten Commandments, God addresses the nation but speaks to each person individually in the second person singular "Thou." The believer's response to God is expected to be "whole-hearted." The Hittites considered anything less a breach of relationship.

The first thing we discover about God in the Ten Commandments is a God who speaks to us one on one, heart to heart and expects the same from us.

We do a disservice to ourselves putting God way up there, out of reach. The God of the Ten Commandments, the 139th Psalm, the God with whom Abraham negotiates and haggles, the God who regards Israel as a cherished if wayward lover is a personal God.

If you are not in the habit of thinking of God in intimate terms what we learn from the Ten Commandments is that that is how God thinks of us. Maybe we're the ones who're out of reach. Maybe its time to give God a break let down our guard.

The second thing we discover about God in the Ten Commandments is that these moral/ethical rules for living are based on the principle that all of life is sacred. In other words, these are more than just a checklist of rules.

If we scratch beneath the surface of the prohibition against worshipping other gods or regarding God's name in vain; or the admonitions to keep the Sabbath and honor our mothers and fathers; or the warning against violating our neighbor by killing, stealing, adulterating, bearing false witness or coveting; if we scratch beneath the surface we see that these rules embody the principle that life is sacred.

These are not just rules but a way of life that honors the holiness of life.

Any religion runs the risk of becoming rule-focused. Yet, rules are grounded in principles. The rule that I brush my teeth is grounded in the principle of self care.

Mature faith focuses on principles not rules. Mature faith even flexes the rules or the letter for the sake of the principles or spirit of the law e.g. Jesus' permission to work on Sabbath to harvest food to feed the hungry. The principle is what matters.

If rules are not grounded in principles all they end up supporting for the individual, the family, the church, or the nation is an empty image or fear.

Some of you remember the famous scene of Jack Nicholson ordering a chicken salad sandwich in the movie *Five Easy Pieces*. Nicholson encounters a rule-conscious waitress who merely quotes the menu and refuses to let him make substitutions.

Since he cannot substitute wheat toast for an English muffin with his omelet he tells the waitress he wants a chicken salad sandwich with his omelet. Fine she says. "I want the chicken salad sandwich," he says, "no mayonnaise, no butter, no lettuce. And here's the easy part, hold the chicken, then bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken salad sandwich, and *you haven't broken any rules.*"

Life can get ridiculous if we lose touch with the principles behind the rules. The reason for the Ten Commandments is not to provide us some checklist for life but to give us a way of discovering and honoring the principle that every aspect of life – our relationships with God, with family and with neighbor – is sacred and to be treated accordingly.

Sometimes I find it helpful to ask what principles are at the center of my parenting, my marriage, my ministry. I admit sometimes rather than a principle what I find is not a principle but someone else's expectations or image of me.

Yet if we are open to it we discover in God's rules from the Ten Commandments to the Golden Rule to Jesus' New Commandment to love one another a God who calls us to center our lives on the principle that life is holy; that God is sovereign; and that our neighbor is to be treated with respect and kindness. Jesus even said we break the rules of adultery, coveting, or killing just by thinking those thoughts thus losing touch with the principle behind them.

Sometimes life can feel like a sailboat tacking back and forth as we try to make decisions on principles and not on image or politics or mere self-interest. Discerning whether my stewardship pledge or performance at the office or marriage reflects the holiness of life is an important exercise. If the devil is in the details, God is in the principles behind our actions.

Finally, if the God we discover in the Ten Commandments is a personal God and a God who wants us to anchor life in the principle of that life is sacred, we discover in the giving of the Ten Commandments a larger process by which God renews and restores us.

You remember the plot. God hears his people suffering under Pharaoh cry out for *change*. God summons Moses to *call* the people to a new land. Moses leads the people into the wilderness. In the wilderness, God *blesses* them with the law which is the foundation and principle for their life. The people are now *equipped* to be a light to the nations and God *sends* them into the Promised Land.

Did you notice the five step process? Changed, called, blessed, equipped, sent. This is the process by which God's people from Moses and the twelve tribes to you and me live out our faith.

But if you look at the average church today this is not what we see. What we see is a process, some say, born out of 1950s corporate life in America. This corporate model is focused not on the cycle of call and sending but on the goal of institutional maintenance.

It goes like this: join the church, get on a committee, chair a committee, get elected to a board, experience burn out, when the church calls to recruit you yet again, tell them you paid your dues.

As important as institutional maintenance is it will never be able to sustain and grow a congregation. Mere institutional maintenance loses touch with a God who is personal and intimate as well as the deep principles which gave birth to the institution in the first place.

The only thing that will renew and restore members of faith communities – and those communities themselves – is a process that meets the needs of the individual to change while at the same time bringing hope and justice to the world.

Fred Buechner put it this way: he said God calls us to the place where our great gladness meets the world's deep need. That's how God called Abraham and Sarah, that's how God called Moses and Miriam, that's how God called the Apostles, and that's how God calls you and me.

What excited me about the church long before I became a minister was a Big Brother/Little Brother program in college. I wanted to change my life from a narcissistic and unfulfilled existence and do more than hang at the fraternity house or gym. A twelve year old boy from Zanesville, Ohio gave me that opportunity. My gladness met his need for a male role model.

As I think about those of you who have shared your excitement about your faith and the mission of Westminster what comes to mind are similar stories about tutoring, building Habitat homes, reaching out to members at times of loss or illness.

God's process of call and sending renews and restores us because we discover and participate in God's purpose for our lives and God's dream for the human family.

Maybe it's time for a personal inventory. Are you feeling burned out or renewed and restored in life? Is your relationship with God distant and occasional or daily and personal? What would others say about your actions at home and work – do they reveal the holiness of life? As the fall season gets underway I can't imagine three more important questions. Amen