

Setting the Table

Exodus 20:1-4 7-9 12-20

Psalm 19

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Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. . . . You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. . . . Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

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The image of Jesus and the disciples gathered around the table for the Last Supper is one of the most iconic images in Christianity. A blessing is given, bread is broken, wine is poured, and this meal will forever be central to Christian worship, to Christian identity, as we follow Jesus' command to "Do this in remembrance of me."

Our focus naturally is on the people in the scene, and all that this particular night will come to mean, but let's step back from that for just a moment, and consider how that evening came to be, all the preparations for the meal. How was the table set, how was the groundwork laid in anticipation?

Think about the particular room, the Passover feast, the table setting, think about the organization and the preparation that would have had to take place. The gospels tell us that Jesus sent Peter and John to a certain man, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" Jesus told them that when they entered the city they would see a man carrying a jar of water who would meet them, and they would follow him into a house. They were then to say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

To observe the Passover meal the disciples would have to obtain unleavened bread, fruit, spices, herbs, wine and a sacrificial lamb. The borrowed upper room would have had to be searched for any trace of yeast. There would need to be water, a towel and a basin for the rituals of hand and feet washing. Cushions and pillows for reclining would need to be there. The table would be set in a particular manner, so that in front of each seat there would be four glasses for ritual wine, one plate, cutlery, and a napkin. There would be several candles on the table and seating cards would need to be in place.

There would also be spiritual preparations for Passover as each would examine their own worthiness to participate with clean and repentant hearts, and let go of old sinful habits. Each would have been mindful of the gratitude for their faith story.

They would remember and retell the story of the Lord God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and that they had followed God's commandments for worship and ethical living, the commandments that shaped their identity so that they would be able to make their whole lives pleasing to God in order that life may be a fertile ground from which blessings, health and prosperity can grow from God.

All of the preparations for the Passover meal are an essential part of the meal; they are ritual, intention, purpose and meaning. Preparations set the table for Passover, for the Last Supper, for the first celebration of Communion, and for the Communion we celebrate today.

On any Communion Sunday there are careful and intentional preparations for the bread and the cup, and how the table is set. This happens at each and every Christian Communion celebration although many differences abound in how each denomination, each culture, each individual church, celebrates the sacrament. On World Communion Sunday we pay more attention to the unity with other Christians around the world in our diverse remembrances of Jesus as we break the bread and drink from the cup. We become attentive to the different breads, drinks and languages of the liturgy. We lift in prayer the challenges and hardships that some Christians endure in order to worship, in order to be at the Communion table. We honor the diversity among us as we live out the words of John's gospel that "that they may all be one."

Yet before we celebrate we must set the table, and not just by the linens, the plate and the cup, but by our mindset and our hearts, so that when we come to the table in song and in prayer we do so in ways that let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, our rock and our redeemer. We set the table for Communion by the spiritual preparations we make, by the ways in which we follow the moral principles, the moral compass, for faithful living, the ten commandments Moses carried down from Mt Sinai, and the two commandments that Jesus taught that summed up the whole Old Testament: “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.” And the second it like it “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We set the table for Communion by our spiritual preparations, by our confessions of the ways we have fallen short of the moral principles and then received God’s grace and assurance.

It’s been 3500 years since God spoke the words of the ten commandments to Moses, and while each generation, each society, interprets them to their own times, the commandments have not changed as human nature has not changed. We still struggle with what we worship, how we speak when we are angry, how we find time for rest and worship, keeping healthy relationships, honoring all the different expressions of life, holding onto only what is ours, and controlling what we desire.

The psalmist offers us advice and wisdom for understanding the commandments as a precious gift, a moral path, a teacher, and a way of peace. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Pastor and blogger Alan Brehm, says that the commandments are a guidebook as, "The directions for living we find in the commandments are intended to be put into practice in real life to make that life more whole, more peaceful, more joyful. When we live this way, we are allowing the life and love of God to flow through us, healing the broken and wounded world around us."

As we spiritually set the table and prepare to join with our Christian siblings around the world, may we allow the life and love of God to flow through us, healing the broken and wounded world, and may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.