

Sermon for Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 22A
October 4, 2026
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of all of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, *
O Lord, our strength and my redeemer.

That last verse of today's Psalm,
with a shift in person, is the prayer
every preacher says in his or her heart before delivering a sermon.
As preachers, we don't know what impact our words will have \on the hearts and minds of
those who hear us.

When I was young, sermons were just another opportunity for a nap. Better a nap than to
listen, because when I listened too closely,
I would be moved to think about God and my life,
and just how little my life and my God seemed to have in common.

I remember a story from one sermon in which our pastor,
a man named Robert Hazen, asked a question:
if you were driving in the middle of the desert
and came to a stop sign, would you stop?
Now that was back in Indiana, and southern Indiana to boot.
There weren't long stretches of road, and no deserts.

In fact, any stop sign was there
to keep people from running into each other
because you couldn't see round the corner or what was coming.
I always thought it was a trick question,
like if you stopped your car might stall
and you'd be stranded in the desert.
But then I wasn't but eight or nine years old,
so how could I have realized
he was talking about following the laws of God.

We call them the ten commandments,
and the Hebrews are given them at Mount Sinai

in the Exodus reading today.

One God, no idols, no swearing, keep the Sabbath, honor parents,
no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting.

Where the stop sign fits in I've never really been sure,
but these were the basics of the Law of God.

In Greek they are called the Decalogue.

We may say them during Lent each Sunday.

For Jews the Law, the Torah, contain 603 more commandments.

The tradition has it that God gave Moses the others verbally
after writing these ten on the stone tablets,
and Moses wrote the others in the Torah:
that's the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Christian teaching has difficulty with the idea of God's law
containing so many commandments,
and we have a hard time looking at the Law as a liberating gift.
We tend to look at rules as binding rather than freeing.

As Moses says though,

"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."

You see, for the Hebrews
there had been no way of knowing
when you were doing right or wrong.
A code of conduct had not been written down.
With the giving of the Law,
they were given the measure of being able to tell
when they were right with God and when they were not.

And contained in that was the process
by which you could return to the loving arms of God
whenever you strayed.

That's what Jews everywhere did two weeks ago with Yom Kippur. They gathered and
confessed and atoned for their sins
against other people and against God.

We work through that process each Lent,
but we also confess our sins each week
because we all fall short of loving God
with all our hearts and minds and strengths
and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Paul claims righteousness under the Law
in our reading from the Letter to the Philippians
but dismisses that righteousness

in favor of the righteousness
based on knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord.

This is the point, I believe,
to the story Jesus tells the Pharisees about the tenants,
and not the traditional view of this parable.

Traditionally, this parable has been used as proof
that God has rejected the Jews
because they killed the prophets and Jesus.

But it is not Jesus who says the tenants will be thrown out
and the vineyard given to others.
That comes from the listeners;
it is a human verdict of the tenants' behavior.

I believe the lesson here
is one of stewardship of the earth and its resources.
As we have worked to live together,
God has sent his messengers to assist us
in determining what we should do,
and we have ignored them,
and still God keeps trying to get the message across:
Love one another.

If we are to love one another,
perhaps one day we may all take our stewardship of this world
and of our resources seriously.
If so, I'd like to offer a different version of the texts today.

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
One day tells its tale to another,
and their voices go out into all lands,
and their message to the ends of the world.*

*My Lord had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded grapes ripe with the morning Sun.*

*And elsewhere in the land
there was a landowner who planted a vineyard,
put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it,
and built a watchtower.
Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.
When the harvest time had come,
he sent his sons to the tenants to collect his produce,
and they returned to him tenfold of his expectations.*

*For dearest, I do not consider that I have made this life my own;
but this one thing I do:
forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize
of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*Because Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray,
and to give more than we either desire or deserve:
Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid,
and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask,
except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior.*

We must strive to be the good in the world,
and to know what we do each time we act for the good
we plant another vine in the Vineyard of the Kingdom
so that life will be good for our children
and their children and for generations without number.