

Proper 22, Year A

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

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

The great theologian Karl Barth
is *said* to have said
that a preacher should always preach
with the Bible in one hand
and the newspaper in the other.

This is good advice
not just for preachers,
but for *all* Christians.

We who love the Lord Jesus—
we who are *in* this world but not *of* it,
we who are citizens of this kingdom
and the next—
we must know both sides.

With empathy and honesty,
with clarity and concern,
we *have* to understand
the world in which we live.
We Christians do not get
to bury our heads in the sand,
nor do we get to keep them in the clouds.

On the other hand,
we can never, ever, ever forget
that we Christians are called
to interpret *everything* we see
through the great story of scripture,
through the convictions of our faith,
through the hope of our calling,
and through the lens of God's love.

You and I are dual citizens.
And like two passports
to two very different kingdoms,
we hold the Bible in one hand,
and the newspaper in the other.

* * *

I say all of this because
this is another one of those weeks
in which the contrast
between our two kingdoms
has grown even more brutally stark.

What does the newspaper say?
The newspaper says it's time once again
to update our statistics.
We now have a new record
for the worst mass shooting
in the history of our nation.
The old record was set
just a mere fourteen months ago.

And alongside that new record,
we have incompetence in our leadership,
fears about our rights,
confusion about our laws,
and no emerging consensus
about where to go from here.

That's what our newspaper tells us.

Meanwhile, in our Bible today,
here comes Moses
stumbling down Mt. Sinai
the Ten Commandments
freshly carved, resting in his hands,
ready to be given to the people . . .
a fresh start for a new nation.

How do we read all of this together?
With the Bible in one hand
and the newspaper in the other,
what is the truth we are supposed to hear?

* * *

Well, let's start with the Bible
and the Ten Commandments.

Actually, if we wanted,
we could pick just *one* commandment
and talk about it alone.

Any one of the Ten Commandments
would be enough to fill fifteen sermons,
let alone just one.

We could talk about
the sixth commandment:
“You shall not murder,”
for it certainly seems to apply this week.
But my hope is that most of us
already have that one well in hand.

Or we could talk about
the first and second commandments:
“You shall have no other gods before me;
you shall make for yourself no idols,”
and we could put them up against
the first and second *amendments*
to do some real thinking and talking about
where our laws and our loyalties conflict
more than we wish they would.

But I think the truth for us today
is not to be found in
one particular law,
one commandment,
one amendment,
or one decree . . .
whether from the government or from God.

I think the truth for us today
is to be found in the fullness of it all
and in the importance what it means
to be a *righteous people*.

* * *

All summer long—and now well into the fall—
you and I have been tracking along
with the Old Testament,
watching as God has adopted and shaped
an entire people for himself.

It started months ago with Abraham,
before he was even “Abraham.”
“Abram, Abram,” God says,
“I will make of you a great nation!”

From there we've read how Abraham's
sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons
fought, flourished, and grew;
how they became a captive people in the land of Egypt;
how they followed Moses through the Red Sea;
and how they wondered and wandered
as God shaped them, molded them,
and made them his own . . .
a righteous people for a righteous God.

And today, we find Moses coming down Mt. Sinai,
giving them the very Law that will define them,
the very words that will shape them
into who God intends them to be.

These great Ten Commandments are intended
both for the life of the *individual*
and for the life of the *community*.

Interestingly, the original Hebrew does not say,
“*Y'all* shall not murder,” or
“*Y'all* shall keep the Sabbath.”

It says “you.”
Singular.

Each and every commandment
is addressed
singularly,
personally,
directly
to *you*.

You bear the full responsibility
for living according to the
ethics that God has prescribed.

And yet, these commandments
are not given one-by-one to each individual.
They are given by God to a whole nation at once,
designed to shape *an entire people*
into something better, something holy, something different
from all the other nations around them.

When it comes to

the laws,
the ethics,
the commandments of God,
it seems we're simultaneously
all in this as individuals,
and all in this together.

* * *

Somewhere along the way, however,
there has been a great shift—
an unexpected divorce—
between our faith and morals as individuals
and our faith and morals as a people.

It is entirely possible
for a Christian today to say,
“I am a moral person.
I love the Lord.
I pray.
I do no harm to others.
What else is required of me?”

On the other hand,
it is entirely possible
for a Christian today to be
so focused on the cause of justice
that they neglect to say their prayers,
stay grounded in God,
and tend to their own souls.

As Ernst Kaseman once put it,
the problem in the world
and in the churches is that
the pious aren't liberal,
and the liberals aren't pious.

But if our two passports—
our Bibles and our newspapers—
tell us anything at all this week,
they tell us that both are required.

Our God commands each of us to be *moral persons*,
and thereby commands us to be *a moral people*.

We can read our newspapers

as privately moral, upright persons
and sit, and wonder, and despair
with total impotence
at the horror of it all,
or we can stand up together
and declare as a people that
something must be done.

It is the modern Christian —
with both passports in hand—
who prays to God on Sunday
for those who lost their lives in Las Vegas,
and who calls her senators and congressmen on Monday
to say, “Tell me your plan to address mass shootings.
Tell me your plan.
Tell me you have a plan.
Tell me you’re working on a plan.
Tell me you’re listening to others
on both sides of the aisle to come up with a plan.
We don’t even have to agree on the details, but
tell me you’re seeing what I’m seeing,
tell me you’re using common sense,
tell me you’re not doing nothing.
By God, tell me you’re doing *something*.
Tell me you have a plan.”

It is fine and right for us to be
good, moral, righteous individuals—
the kind who don’t commit murder—
but there are times when
our private, individual morality
is not enough to meet the demands
of the evils in this world.

We must also be
a good *people*,
a moral *people*,
a righteous *people*
with the collective courage and will
to demand the greater good
for those who live beyond the walls
of our own churches and homes.

* * *

Along those lines, here’s a final, important thought.

We at St. Anne's often remark
at how much we love one another
despite the fact that we know we hold
many wide and diverse views.

Look around this room.
There are liberals and conservatives.
There are Republicans and Democrats.
There are self-proclaimed "gun nuts"
and those who have gone a whole lifetime
without even being in the same room as a gun.

Yet we love each other so much.
It's that love that makes our church thrive.

And yet, when the idea of talking about guns comes up—
whether as a Sunday School topic,
or an idea for a special forum—
the response has always been,
"No. We could never talk about that here."

But why? *Why?*
Are we afraid of controversy?
Are we afraid that our friendships are so brittle?
Nonsense.

The newspaper keeps saying,
"We need to talk about this as a nation, but we can't.
We need to talk about this as a nation, but we won't.
We need to talk about this as a nation, but we don't know how."

Well, friends,
if we can't talk about it here,
then who can?

If we won't talk about it here,
then who will?

So, I don't know how, and I don't know when,
but at some point in the not-too-distant future,
we will find a way to have
an open-minded, open-hearted
conversation about guns.
Chances are we won't arrive at any new answers.
Chances are we won't get it all figured out.

But this is one of the great, moral topics of our times,
and it's time for us as a moral people
to love one another enough to gather together,
to listen, to learn, to seek to understand,
and to ask God together,
"What will you have us do, O Lord?"

We are not in this just as individuals.
We are in this together.

* * *

From St. Paul
to St. Augustine
to blessed Karl Barth,
we Christians have been reminded
throughout the ages
that we are, in fact, dual citizens.
Like passports in our pockets,
we carry the Bible in one hand
and the newspaper in the other.

We will not always agree
on how to interpret them both,
but I hope we can agree on this:
that somehow our God is in control,
working all things in *this world*
to become more and more
like the image of *his world*.
And somehow,
for reasons I'll never understand,
he intends to use *us*
to get much of it done.

Not just good persons, but a good *people*.
Not just moral persons, but a moral *people*.
Not just righteous persons, but a righteous *people*.

We are in this together:
you, me, and most importantly,
the living, loving God.

Thanks *be* to God,
and amen.